

THE
IRON
STAIR

A Romance
of Dartmoor

by
"RITA"



✓ THE IRON STAIR

A ROMANCE OF DARTMOOR

BY

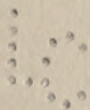
“ RITA ” *friend.*

(MRS. DESMOND HUMPHREYS) ✓

Author of

“ Calvary,” “ Peg the Rake,” “ The Ink Slinger,” etc.

Humphreys, Mrs. Eliza M. J. (Gollan)
“



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Mo. 2.

“ The warders with their jangling keys
Opened each listening cell,
And down the iron stair we tramped
Each to his separate Hell.”

The Ballad of Reading Gaol.

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THE IRON STAIR

THE IRON STAIR

CHAPTER I

“I WALKED WITH OTHER SOULS IN PAIN”

To say that Aubrey FitzJohn Derringham was bored to death with life and its banalities is to say very little for that gentleman's appreciation of Fortune's gifts. Yet the fact remains. He was bored. He suffered existence rather than rejoiced in it. He looked out on the world and appraised its values by the light of a dilettante experience. He had tasted pleasure warily and sipped laborious delights with cautious lips. Surface value meant little or nothing to him. He wanted to plunge into depths of meaning; to pierce the shallows of sensation, to gauge actualities and deal with the Day of Reckoning in advance. These methods had effectually blunted any possibility of enjoyment measured by an accepted standard, and life, as the actual important factor of happiness, was to him but the treadmill of necessity.

Aubrey was the second son of a highly respectable Peer of recent creation. His elder brother was equally respectable and equally keen on doing his duty "in that state of life" to which the Catechism refers, and which the accident of birth renders obligatory, even to the most rebellious of its victims. He had married well and suitably, provided heirs for the due carrying on of family honours, and occasionally made a blundering speech in that House so hated by Radicals, and beloved by snobs. To Lord Dulcimer the Honourable Aubrey FitzJohn was a source of dire unrest and perplexity. It was not what he had done but what he might do that was a thorn in the flesh of prosperous self-satisfaction. Aubrey was thoroughly unorthodox in every sense that word represents to prigs, and Puritans. That his life owned no open scandals only assured his brother that there must be secret and terrible ones hidden beneath its careless indifference. He was always distrustful of Aubrey; always afraid that something quixotic or unorthodox would send its flash-light across the path of dull propriety marked out as his own *pied-à-terre*. When they met at exclusive clubs, or political dinner parties, the contrast between the two brothers was the despair and delight of their respective hosts, or hostesses. A greater contrast could not well be imagined. Both men were friendly and agreeable, and too well bred to resort to absolute reprisals, yet there was a subtle undercurrent of animosity running

beneath the surface of every discussion and embittering every argument.

Thus matters stood when one April morning the Honourable Aubrey FitzJohn discovered he had arrived at the venerable age of thirty.

It had pleased him to ignore the fact, but the morning post, brought up by his valet and factotum, William Chaffey, aroused him to the fact that his relatives were not oblivious of a matter so important. There was a brief word of congratulation from Lord Dulcimer, a letter from his mother, and a box of violets gathered in the woods of Derringham Chase, and sent to "dear Uncle Aubrey" by his twin nieces.

Added to which Chaffey the imperturbable added to his usual respectful greeting the banal congratulation suitable to the occasion. "Thanks, but I hoped you'd forgotten," said Aubrey, accepting early tea and the morning papers, after a glance at his correspondence.

"Forgotten, sir, no, sir," said Chaffey, standing respectfully at attention. "Six years today, sir," he added in a subdued tone.

Aubrey looked up. "Six years—what?"

"Since you honoured me with your trust, sir, and took me into your service."

Aubrey looked at the queer wizened face, the short alert figure, the wistful dog-like eyes. "Is it—as long?" he asked.

"It seems short to me, sir. But then I've been happy."

"Queer," said his master. "I wish anything or anybody on the face of this dull old earth could give me a chance of such a sensation."

"Don't you ever feel happy, sir? You always doin' a kindness, and that generous with your money. It seems extraordinary, if you'll pardon my sayin' so, sir."

"I think you know you can pretty well say anything you like to me, Chaffey," said his master.

"Lord love you, sir! How am I ever goin' to repay you for your trust—the chance you gave me!"

"Well, it's been well placed. So that's all we need say about it. Any news this morning?"

It was one of Chaffey's duties to skim the cream of the morning papers, and then direct his master's attention to any item of interest, sensation, or importance.

"Yes, sir, that—that case will be concluded. Judgment today."

"Case?" Aubrey yawned, and half closed his eyes. "Not Lady Featherstone's?"

"No, sir, the one I spoke of, a month or two back. That young fellow supposed to have forged his uncle's signature. Perhaps you've forgotten?"

"No. Didn't we take out one of my own cheques and prove how easy it was?"

Chaffey's queer eyes glistened. "Yes, sir. You trusted me as far as *that*."

"It was easy enough. Too easy. I wonder it hasn't been done oftener. Four into forty; just

the first stroke of the *u* into *r*; the second into *t*, the last letter a *y*. Then the figures—only an *o* after the *four*, if there happens to be a space. There *was* a space, I suppose?"

The man took out a crumpled slip of paper from a dirty leather pocket-book. "This is it, sir. You threw it into the waste paper basket, and I took it out."

"What made you do that?"

"Curiosity, sir, and also the fact that it was a cheque, and—and signed, sir."

Aubrey FitzJohn sat up. "Did I sign it? I don't remember——"

"See for yourself, sir."

The man gave him the crumpled paper, and then walked across the room to draw the curtains and let in the sunlight. These duties accomplished he glanced at the occupant of the bed. Aubrey was sipping his tea with a preoccupied air. The cheque lay on the silk coverlet beside the letters and morning papers.

"Shall I get your bath, sir?"

"Not yet. It's only eight, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir. But the Law Courts open at ten, sharp, sir."

"Law Courts! What have I to do with the Law Courts?"

"You told me always to direct your attention to any case of *real* interest, sir. I venture to do so in the present instance."

"You mean this—forgery?"

"Yes, sir. Verdict, today."

"I wonder if it would interest me. What are the facts, as far as you have gathered them?"

The queer little valet came a step nearer. "Concisely, sir, as neat as I can put it, they're as follows. Two brothers, orphans, left to care of a rich uncle, wealthy manufacturer, Midlands. One goes into the Church. The other, a sort of happy-go-lucky, 'self worst enemy' chap, idles about Manchester. Uncles likes eldest—best. Bein' twins, there's only a matter o' twenty minutes or so majority——"

"Seniority—is I think the word," suggested Aubrey.

"Thank you, sir. Yes, sir. It *is* the word. My education is, in a manner o' speakin', self-made, sir. I beg your leniency."

Aubrey nodded. "Taken as read," he murmured.

"Exactly, sir. I've some knowledge of Board Meetings, sir."

"What haven't you a knowledge of, Chaffey? It would be hard to say."

"A student of life, and of the world, sir, has to have his eyes open and use his wits. But to resume the story. Eldest boy was the fav'rite always, 'cept with the cousin, uncle's only daughter."

"Oh, the inevitable woman!"

"Yes, sir. I'm sorry I can't leave her out. Seventeen or eighteen. Pretty, and both brothers fell in love with her."

"Sounds like popular fiction for the middle classes?"

"Exactly, sir. It do seem sort of melodramatic. But to get on with the interest, sir. There came a time in London when the young fellow was rather goin' it a bit, and then followed the usual 'pull up' for want of funds. Uncle, girl, and young feller were in town. Elder brother had just fixed up for Holy Orders, so called, and was expecting a curacy in a little out of the world parish in Devonshire. Before settlin' down he and the family were doin' a little sight seein', and stayin' at one of the big London hotels. It was there the forgery was committed. Uncle gave the young nephew a cheque for four pounds one morning to pay a bill. He changed the amount to forty pounds. Uncle only got his London Bank book twice a year. He had another account in Manchester. Young fellow thought he'd got a clear six months——"

"Wasn't the cheque crossed?" asked Aubrey.

"No, sir. Negligent. But even business men are that—on occasions. Young feller paid the bill, got thirty-six pounds in change of the cheque and—is now brought up to answer the charge. That's the case, sir. You'll be able to hear the details better explained in Court, and to follow it out, if it interests you. I think it will, sir."

"It seems to interest you, Chaffey. Do you know these people?"

The man hesitated for a moment. "I can't say

I do, sir. Only a case like this has interest for me, as you may imagine, sir."

"I can believe it. One question more. What's your opinion? Did the young fellow commit the forgery?"

"Never, sir! I'd swear it!"

"I wonder how you arrived at that conclusion?"

"I've studied many criminal cases in my time, sir, since—since you so generously helped me back to a decent life again."

"Never mind that. It's old history. You deserved all I did for you. Honest service is hard to come by. I'm the envy of all my friends, and the despair of all my enemies. They were sure I should repent of my bargain."

"Not if I can help it, sir, as there's a God to judge me!"

"Words—between us are superfluous, Chaffey."

"I know you'll never hear anything, sir."

"Go and get my bath ready, and telephone for the car. Ten o'clock you say at the Courts. Well, ten minutes ought to do it."

"I'll see that it does, sir."

Aubrey FitzJohn laughed. "Oh—you! Endangering your license and my reputation!"

"I *can* drive, sir. You'll allow that?"

"You certainly can. What is there in point of fact you can't do, Chaffey? You're an admirable valet, a fair cook, a past master in the art of boot cleaning, and the veriest devil of a chauffeur.

The proverbial 'handy man' of Naval records should take off his cap to you."

"You're pleased to overrate my services, sir," said Chaffey humbly. "I do my poor best. But when every duty is a labour of love, manner o' speaking, why there's no merit in it, not that I can see."

"Life is only what our own point of view means for us," observed his master, as he threw aside the bedclothes, and slipped out in mauve silk pyjamas. He was fond of mauve as an æsthetic colour, and deemed it hard that fashion forbade it for masculine apparel. He sought compensation in his sleeping toilet. Dressing-gown, slippers, and pyjamas, all bore hints of this unusual taste. Oddly enough it suited him. His clear pale skin and light brown hair set off the somewhat trying shade, and yet gave no hint of effeminacy.

When the valet returned from the adjoining bathroom he found his master standing before the glass with a hair-brush in each hand. His hair was in as correct order, as if he were ending instead of beginning his toilet.

Chaffey went up to the bed, collected the letters and papers, and placed them on a table. He kept one slip of paper in his hand, and glanced from it to the figure at the dressing glass.

"Excuse me, sir," he said apologetically, "but this cheque——"

"Well?"

"You've left it—with your letters."

Aubrey turned round, still holding a brush in each hand.

"You're very mysterious this morning, Chaffey. I can't imagine why you've preserved that old slip of paper. Pitch it into the fire."

He turned to the glass again.

"Yes, sir. Certainly, sir. But—I wanted you to be quite sure you *had* signed it."

"Of course I must have done so. But I can't remember——"

"Would you mind looking at it again, sir?"

The man came nearer, still with that air of apology and self-consciousness. Aubrey FitzJohn put down one brush, and turning took the crumpled cheque in his fingers.

"Of course it's my signature. I could swear to it! What I can't understand is why you've kept it all this time."

"I kept it, sir, to prove your memory for one thing."

"My memory!"

"Yes, sir, and—my honesty for another."

"You mean you could have cashed this cheque as easily as—well, as this young fellow we are to see, has done?"

"No, sir. I didn't mean that—exactly. I only wanted to convince you that memory isn't the only sense that plays tricks with us."

"You are excelling yourself this morning, Chaffey. I know my service is a liberal education, but I fail to see what your pertinacity

respecting this cheque has to do with the day's programme."

"Nothing, sir, nothing at all. I am conscious of a liberty, sir. I crave your pardon."

"All right. Order the car and a—devilled kidney—it has a legal flavour about it!"

He turned to the glass again, and put the brush in his hand down beside the other. Reflected in the mirror he caught sight of the valet's imperturbable face. It seemed less stolid. There was a twist of the queer mouth, a sort of twinkle in the eyes. What had come to the man he wondered? At the door the valet turned again.

"I'm sorry, sir. But you were right in your doubts. *You never did sign that cheque!*"

His master flashed round on him, more in surprise than anger.

"You old villain!"

"No, sir. It was only a try-on. You said once that your signature was absolutely unforgeable. I—well it sort o' put me on my metal, sir, and I fished out that cheque when you threw it in the waste paper basket, and I said to myself I'll have a try. It took you in, sir. You must allow it took you in."

"It certainly did. But what an odd thing to do. Let me see—it wasn't for *that* sort of thing you had two years of His Majesty's pleasure?"

"No, sir. I told you—burglary."

"Of course." He laughed with sudden amusement. "A great achievement that came to grief,

and in which I was greatly interested. Well, having forged my signature, and taken me in rather successfully, you may as well hand back that cheque. Temptation is never so near as when we put it away from us."

"I hope, sir, as you don't think I had any motive in doing this; only to prove that I could do it?"

"I think you are an estimable valet, Chaffey, and I don't bother about your private life, or adventures. All the same, I'd like to see that bit of paper again."

The man brought it and gave it to him. He scrutinized it carefully near and at a distance. "Yes. It would deceive me if I had to swear to it. I wonder you didn't try the experiment on the Bank?"

"Sir!" Not injured innocence but genuine hurt feeling spoke out in the man's voice. "I hoped—I thought this might show you you could trust me. It wasn't a right thing to do, sir, I know, but, as an experiment, it sort of interested me. I have your own authority for saying that an interest is worth the sacrifice of a prejudice."

"Good Lord! Chaffey, if you're going to bring up my own epigrams as accusers I shall have to cry off our bargain! Here, be off! You're wasting my time, and I shall never be dressed, and the car won't be here!"

He tore the cheque in pieces, and turned quickly to the bathroom. The man laid out his shaving

things, and then retired, that queer twisted smile still lighting up his face.

The car drew up at the ugly undignified buildings sacred to British judicature, and emblematic of British architecture.

"You can garage the car, and go up in the gallery if you like," said Aubrey to his chauffeur. "If I'm interested I'll wait till the court rises. If not, I'll go home after lunch. Be here at one o'clock."

Chaffey touched his cap, and closed the door.

Aubrey Derringham sauntered into the great central hall and enquired of a policeman as to the special court he was seeking. As he turned off to the stairway, a bewigged and brisk young barrister hurried past. They greeted each other as old friends.

"Who'd have thought of seeing you here!" exclaimed Harcourt Cunninghame. "What's up? Not D. C., eh?"

Aubrey looked injured innocence. "Certainly not! The forgery case: Gale and Jessop. I want to hear it."

"Then you'd better come with me. I'll get you a seat, else you'll have to pretend you're a witness, or go to the stranger's gallery. We're so cramped here there's no room for the lookers-on."

"Who, possibly, might see most of the game," said Aubrey Derringham.

"No doubt. There never was a case yet that

someone didn't believe could have been better carried out by somebody else than the special somebody who *did* muddle through with it. That's Rufus Isaacs. He has a big thing on today."

Aubrey looked at the dark intelligent face and wiry frame of the eminent counsel. He passed on, with brows knit, and eyes on the ground. His self-absorbed aspect spoke of important issues behind some of those closed doors.

The young barrister ushered his friend into the Court Room, where the forgery case had been tried. The Judge was just coming in. The court rose in greeting to his curt nods. Then seats were resumed, and a general rustle of papers and murmur of voices evidenced the opening of business.

Aubrey glanced at the dock, where the prisoner sat between two warders, a pale-faced handsome boy about three or four and twenty. From thence his eyes wandered to the group sitting near the solicitor's table: a stern-faced stolid man; a slim girl, whose face was partially hidden under a large shady hat, and a youth in clerical dress, so startlingly like the prisoner that involuntarily his eyes turned from one face to the other. The resemblance was extraordinary. Aubrey marvelled at it as he traced outline, colouring, features, height. "The two Dromios," he muttered to himself. "Groundwork for tragedy here."

Then he seated himself on one of the hard

wooden benches provided for the spectators of daily recurring drama.

It was not his first experience of Law Courts, or criminal trials. In a life of boredom he had found temporary excitement in such cases as Chaffey brought to his notice. That was one of the queer valet's duties, and it provided mutual interest for master and man. Rarely was the reformed criminal's instinct at fault. A case pronounced by him worth hearing was invariably a *cause célèbre* before it had run through the first edition of the evening papers. Before an hour had passed this morning Aubrey FitzJohn was keenly conscious of that human document in the prisoner's dock. A document whose leaves of life were turned by relentless hands, whose records were voiced by the lash of prejudice inseparable from the traditions of prosecution.

How clever it all was, and how damning to the white-faced boy who listened. Aubrey, watching closely, caught the flash of an eye, an impetuous gesture, spontaneous denial sternly checked. And still the pitiless voice went on, and took up its line of argument till the net was drawn closer and closer round the accused's helplessness, and the listeners confessed it looked more than black for him.

The court rose at the luncheon hour, and Aubrey FitzJohn shared a cutlet and bottle of Bass with his barrister friend. He learnt from him a few details not given in evidence. He learnt also that

the case was a foregone conclusion of "Guilty." Circumstance was too strong for the other plea, and by the time the loosely strung defence was over, Aubrey FitzJohn knew once more "how easily things go wrong" in this delightful world.

In his own mind he was convinced of the boy's innocence. Certain that he had never forged that cheque though the evidence had proved debts, and an evening's escapade in doubtful company, while the defence had been unable to explain either facts in a satisfactory fashion.

The jury retired. In fifteen minutes they had decided their verdict, and Aubrey, watching the haggard young face thought how cruel a thing was Fate. He never took his eyes off the boy. He was reading his life, his temptations, his very soul. When the sentence was delivered he was scarcely surprised at the dramatic episode which closed the scene. The boy sprang to his feet, one arm upraised to heaven.

"I am *not guilty!*"

His voice rang out and over the hushed court like a clarion call. It thrilled even callous hearts indifferent to the momentous consequences of such a verdict. But the warders seized the boy's arm, and hurried him off. The court rose. Barristers and solicitors put up their papers, or gave directions to their clerks; the reporters collected fragments of last written words ready for press, and Aubrey Derringham heard himself saying—"What next?"

CHAPTER II

“A GREAT—OR LITTLE THING?”

WHAT next?

It was a persistent question. One that haunted him through his saunter homewards; that faced him in flaunting content bills of late editions; that gave him an uncomfortable half-hour at the club, and was still clamouring for response as he rested in his luxurious quarters in the Albany, preparatory to dressing for dinner.

He was dining out at eight o'clock, in Grosvenor Square, and expected to be bored as usual. He glanced at the card on his mantelshelf, and then at the clock, and wondered why he had accepted the invitation. There would be politicians who bored you with facts, and lamented a Radical Government largely constituted by their own laziness and inefficiency. There would be a strain of that Semitic element now forcing its way into every channel of society—Finance, Art, and the Press—by reason of its money bags. There might be a few decent women, but that would depend on whether Bridge was or was not the *raison d'être*

of the evening. Mrs. Daniel Schultze's card parties were noted for high play, and society had grown a little shy of them since the *éclat* of a Club scandal had brought her name into prominence.

Aubrey rather liked Bridge, but the women who played it in Mrs. Daniel Schultze's drawing-rooms had a rooted objection to losing, and an equal objection to paying their losses. He hated to remind a woman of a debt. The result of such unusual chivalry was disastrous to his purse, and trying to his temper. Besides chivalry and generosity were thrown away on the class of women who made Bridge the sole object of existence. It was the day of the outsider; the moneyed plutocrat of any nationality. Fine feelings were wasted on such people. Yet Aubrey FitzJohn Derringham could not divest himself of a certain delicacy and generosity of mind and manner even in dealing with them. Such traits deserved to be the heritage of a descendant of a hundred Earls, instead of the hallmark of a New Peerage.

"If it had been one of *them!*" he reflected. "They've done meaner things, wickeder things than that poor boy in the dock today. Card sharpening is as dishonourable as forgery . . . and yet I'll have to grin and smile and put up with pretences of 'forgetfulness' when there's a palpable revoke, or a subterfuge of shuffling when a 'no trump' hand is desired."

Only that Mrs. Schultze was witty and amusing, and gave dinners that put the Marlborough and

the Automobile into the shade, he would not have accepted her invitation. As it was——

He pressed the button of the bell, and Chaffey appeared. He and the car had been sent back from the Law Courts at the conclusion of the case.

"I want to ask you something," said Aubrey, as he lit a cigarette. "You waited for the verdict, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir. You were kind enough to——"

"I know, I know. I saw you were interested. Then you heard what that boy called out?"

"Spontaneous, wasn't it, sir? Sort o' made a lump come up in one's throat when they seized his arms and hurried him off."

"Dramatic," said Aubrey, "but not convincing. At least I suppose not. What I want to ask you, Chaffey, is to—well, to put yourself in that boy's place for the time being. Tell me exactly how *you* felt, when you were hurried off and—away, as he was? I want to know what comes next?"

The man fidgeted nervously at some pretence of tidying a scrupulously tidy room. As far as lay in his power he had tried to outlive the memory of his own downfall and its consequences. That the Law still honoured him with undesirable supervision he knew, and his master knew. The magnificent idea of treating a criminal as a "suspect" *in perpetuo* is one of the triumphs of legal obscurity; an idea worthy of a nation where Christianity is the hypocrite's defence and the honest man's despair. Chaffey owed his quixotic

master a deeper debt than even his dog-like fidelity acknowledged. It had been possible to hold up his head among honest men, and work once more in an atmosphere of trust and confidence.

The question now put threw him off his balance for a moment. There lay so sharp a sting in its demand; so painful a memory behind its answer.

"I'll try to go back, sir. It's all a bit—a bit confused, so to say. One isn't quite oneself as you may suppose, sir. There's been the waiting, and the suspense, and the worrying of lawyers, and the feeling that you're not believed, no matter whether you're innocent or not."

"That must be the hard part of it," said Aubrey.

"No, sir. There's worse than that. It's the—degradation, sir. The feeling that you're treated as a mere brute beast; no sense; no feelings, no decent instincts. That's what makes criminals of us, sir, ninety-nine times out of every hundred. . . . But you want to know how it's going on with young Gale—*now?*"

Aubrey nodded.

"He'll be taken from the court in the van, sir. To one of the nearer prisons, temporary. Then there's the stripping and searching and photographing and impressioning, and his first night in the cells. Then he may be taken on to Wormwood Scrubs, or one of the large convict prisons. I can't say which. There he'll have to work out his sentence. It's a hard one for a first offence, sir, but it struck me there was a sort o'—o' *anymus*,

don't they call it? A dead set against him from the first."

"It's rather hard, I suppose? That—first night in the cells and afterwards—the waking?"

"It is, sir. You feel desperate. At war with the whole world, so to say. When you're condemned—wrongful, I don't know what it must be. Hell, sir, I'd say, if you'll excuse the langwidge."

"We make our own hells, Chaffey, and pretty hot ones sometimes."

"I'm not religious, as you know, sir, an' what I've seen and heard hasn't 'elped to make me so. But those as sins don't want much after punishment I'd say, if so be as they've had a taste of prison life here."

"That boy—I can't forget his face, somehow. Do you think his sentence will do him much harm, morally speaking?"

"He'll never be the same again, sir. The prison taint don't wash off. Pitch is soapsuds to it! No, it sticks and sticks, and burns and burns, and you don't ever feel yourself clean and self-respecting again!"

"Never, Chaffey? I hoped——"

"I know your goodness, sir. I know what you've done for me. Times I *do* feel that it's all been a bad dream, and that I am what you're kind enough to think me, sir. But then, it'll come back. It's bound to come back. Pitch, sir, that's what it is. Sticks so fast, and so close, you're bound to know it's there!"

Aubrey was silent, and the man went quietly out of the room. "Poor beggar," thought his master, "I suppose he'll never really forget!"

He turned to the low bookshelf which ran along one side of the wall, and took out a volume, and opened it. It treated of English prison life in the old convict days when foetid hulks and Botany Bay spelt the doom of manhood however justly punished.

Aubrey had read it before. He read portions of it again on this May evening, while the sun sank low in the west, and the life of the Great City rolled on and on like waves of a restless sea. In his quiet retreat no sound reached his ears save the occasional hoot of a motor, or the faint hum of Piccadilly traffic. The season was in full swing, and the fashionable world was trying to cheat itself once more into the belief that pleasure is an inventive goddess.

Aubrey put back the volume in its place and rose at last. He must dress and get off to Grosvenor Square, unless he wished to keep the table waiting.

Everything was ready for him. Chaffey never neglected a duty, or a collar stud. As Aubrey changed into immaculate evening dress his thoughts went again to that boy in his prison cell, cut off from every enjoyment, sentenced to a living death by the Law he was supposed to have outraged.

"I don't believe he ever did it!"

Aubrey's own voice startled himself. He was conscious of standing before his toilet glass gazing at his own reflection, and yet seeing behind it only that young passionate face, and the trembling lips that proclaimed innocence.

"Funny. I can't get away from that memory!" he said to himself. "Sort of obsesses me! To think of him tonight, and then look at *this*!"

"This" meant the luxury of his own dressing-room, with its appointments and comforts; its note of refined taste, and bachelor independence. The sight of his face in the glass showed it less bored and indifferent than its wont. A certain uneasiness and distress replaced its usual composure. What was the reason? Aubrey asked himself that question again, and found no answer. He had gone to hear this case out of pure curiosity. He had heard it with a sense of indignant helplessness; an irritation provoked by every word of the dogmatic counsel who voiced the prosecution. He had read prejudice into every stilted phrase and stereotyped theory. He had focussed blunders and smiled at deductions. Yet—he had done nothing; he could do nothing. And for two years that unfortunate boy would be condemned to the horrors of which he had been reading. The coarse food, the tyranny, the hateful routine, the hard labour, and worst of all the loneliness and isolation of undeserved imprisonment.

"For he never did it!" Aubrey repeated. "I'll swear he never did it!"

"You're right, sir," said the subdued tones of his attentive valet, at hand to fasten sleeve links, and brush specks from speckless broadcloth. "He never did, if I'm any judge of guilt, or innocence. I ought to be, I've sampled some."

"Chaffey," said his master, "do you think you could possibly find out anything about this case that hasn't transpired in evidence? It seems to me there must be something behind it all. A motive of some sort. Supposing any one bore the boy a grudge? Had an interest in getting him into a false position? Would it be possible to make such enquiries as would lead to a clearing up of the mystery?"

Chaffey shook his head. "I shouldn't worry, sir. The thing's over and done with. No good could come of raking up an old scandal to cover a new one. You see his own people were dead against him. They must have known."

"One's own people are sometimes one's harshest foes," said Aubrey, taking the proffered handkerchief and gloves. "I wish you'd think it out, Chaffey. You're rather keen on detective blunders."

"If you wish it, sir, I'll give the matter my best attention. It's a bit queer, if I may say so, that we should both feel so concerned about this young Gale. . . . Taxi, sir?"

"Yes. I suppose five minutes'll do the trick?"

"The streets are a bit congested, sir. But I'll tell the man to do his best."

As Aubrey Derringham was whirled in and out of the noisy motor traffic that had begun to disorganize London's thoroughfares, he wondered who he was to meet at Mrs. Daniel Schultze's dinner. His previous acquaintance with her hospitality had been limited to an afternoon At Home, or a furious evening of Auction Bridge. There would be sure to be Bridge after tonight's dinner, but he was determined to leave before the dreaded "fours" were arranged. He felt in no mood for such excitement as those rabid enthusiasts proffered.

He was thinking of the different meanings of life as typified by individual interests. Social position to one, wealth to another, success, fame, ambition, achievement. So it had been in past ages, in cities as magnificent, empires as imposing. And Time's relentless scythe had passed over them all, leaving only histories more or less credible. So much, so little; so little, so much. And the same sun still shone on the just and the unjust, the same moon rose on the mysteries and sorrows and wickedness of nights such as this present one. Bringing hope or joy, peace or woe, desire or death. How wonderful it was, and how puzzling.

He looked at the passing crowd. The cabs and carriages and motor cars, each with their well-dressed occupants; each emblematic of some hope, or gain, or intrigue, or mystery. And the houses. Those mansions of the great and the rich, those humbler neighbours elbowing themselves out of a

mews, or a back street, in the endeavour to achieve postal significance. What was the *real* meaning of it all? For what purpose were these crowds, this wealth, these sated, wasteful, extravagant lives, and the puppets who danced in and out of the show?

Before he could realize the drift of such a question his taxi drew up at the Schultze mansion, and he found himself on crimson carpet, and amidst obsequious flunkeys, to the tune of whose ministrations he was soon shaking hands and listening to introductions in the blue and gold drawing-rooms of Mrs. Daniel Schultze.

The lady, of ample presence and Semitic origin, called by her intimates "Mrs. Danny," was extraordinarily gracious to Aubrey FitzJohn Deringham. In the first place he was the son of a Peer. In the next he was considered very exclusive, and extremely difficult to get hold of. Again he was unmarried, and an excellent Bridge player. Mrs. Danny had two fair, or strictly speaking two dark daughters, gifted with that vivid oriental beauty for which their race is famed—in youth. It was her earnest desire that they should become aristocrats by marriage, and she hailed even impecunious younger sons with delight, if only they possessed titled relations, or coroneted prospects.

One of those daughters was Aubrey's dinner complement. She was only just "out," so the season and everything connected with it held

charms of the “unknown.” Her more *blasé* sister was trembling on the verge of an engagement not yet announced.

Miriam Schultze was as lovely as a dream of the Orient, but she possessed no attraction for the Honourable Aubrey. He foresaw the changes that a few years would bring even to a profile as faultless, a figure as slim. Besides, in all she said, and looked, there lurked that touch of vulgarity from which her father and mother suffered, and which no education had eradicated in their offspring. But tonight the girl embarked upon a subject of discussion that rendered her companion less critical than usual. Nothing more or less than the forgery case which was engrossing Aubrey’s mind. “I’m so interested in it,” she said, “for Joss Myers, who defended the boy, is a cousin of ours. He was very full of it. It’s his first really important case. And I see by tonight’s paper there was a verdict of guilty. He’ll be awfully sore about that.”

Aubrey was astonished. He plunged straightway into a discussion of his own day’s occupation. He tried to find out from the girl what was her cousin’s real opinion of his client.

“Oh—he thought all along the boy hadn’t done it!” she exclaimed. “And that night out of which they made so much was a put-up thing. He was made drunk, and then supposed to have got into a scrape for which he had to pay the piper. Joss says he’s inclined to think it was

really the *other* brother who's guilty, not Geoffrey Gale."

"The other brother!"

Aubrey rejected a *sorbet* in his excitement. "The young curate? What on earth makes your cousin think that?"

"Have you read all the evidence?" asked the girl.

"Not any. I was present this morning by mere accident. I heard the speeches for prosecution and defence, and the summing up, and the verdict. The case interested me strangely. The boy was so young, and then—that heart-broken cry of his—at the end. It made a lasting impression on my mind."

"I read it in tonight's *Pall Mall*, while my hair was being done," she said. "I wish I had gone to the Courts. I was there the first day, but I couldn't spare the time again. One's days are so full at the commencement of the season."

Aubrey smiled indulgently at the affectation of importance. Then he led her back to the all-engrossing subject of the Forgery Case. He wanted to hear what Joshua Myers had learnt of the boy's character, nature, and associations. Before he left the dinner table he had made up his mind to seek the young lawyer himself, and try to fit disjointed facts and circumstances into the complicated puzzle that had meant Geoffrey Gale's prosecution.

He did his best to avoid Bridge, pleading another

engagement. He might have succeeded but for Miriam's intervention. "Just one rubber. *Do—* and play at my table. Joss Myers hasn't come yet. He promised to be my partner."

"Myers? Is *he* coming?"

Aubrey hesitated, and was lost. He felt that he might as well stay on the chance of an introduction to the barrister who had lost his first case. He might learn some important facts that would throw light on Geoffrey Gale's history.

CHAPTER III

“BY EACH LET THIS BE HEARD”

JOSHUA MYERS turned up at the Schultze domicile too late for Bridge, but early enough for that introduction desired by Aubrey. No one spoke of his first failure, if indeed any one thought of it as an interest sandwiched between lost rubbers, or hard-won victories on “no trumps.”

Aubrey made himself specially agreeable to the dark sombre-looking young man, who was spoken of as likely to be an ornament to the Bar, and who brought to his profession the acuteness of his race, as well as no mean portion of its wealth and influence.

When Myers took his leave Aubrey did the same, and finding his new acquaintance inclined for exercise, discovered that their ways lay sufficiently near for companionship. He made his opportunity and contrived to lead the conversation to their mutual interest in the Forgery Case. Myers was less reticent than his manner betokened; in fact he seemed keen on explaining just how difficulties had been made, the facts rendered unassailable. He

seemed surprised at Aubrey FitzJohn Derringham's interest in criminal matters. More than surprised when, accepting his invitation for a smoke and an apollinaris, he accompanied him to his rooms, and witnessed the luxury of his surroundings.

Over cigarettes and whiskey they touched on political difficulties, and the prospects of prolonged Liberalism. Then, very cautiously, Aubrey led the conversation to the subject that so obsessed him. If the Law was so strong, and yet could make mistakes so vital to human liberty, who was safe?

Joshua Myers sprang eagerly into argument.

"The boy was to blame—in a manner," he said. "He held something back. I couldn't get it out of him. I told him the case was pretty black, but he wouldn't believe me. Even up to the moment that the jury returned with their verdict cut and dried and agreed upon, he didn't seem to realize what it meant."

"That accounts for his declaration of innocence, I suppose?"

"As if *that* was any use," answered the barrister. "A dramatic episode worked up into the best journalese; warranted to sell a few hundred 'extra specials.' But—it convinced no one."

"It convinced me."

Myers flashed his vivid dark eyes on the quiet face. "Really? You formed your own opinion of the case, in spite of evidence?"

"I heard none. I only attended the last act of the drama."

"Ah—if it was only *that*! I saw the poor boy tonight, in his cell. It was very—painful."

Aubrey thought none the worse of legal authority for manifesting a little natural feeling. He lit a fresh cigarette, and paid renewed attention to the syphon, before resuming the conversation.

"You won't appeal, I suppose?"

"No use. The judge had made up his mind. That carries weight in the higher courts. Besides, he has no money."

"It seems hard that his own relative should be the prosecutor."

"Hard! My dear Mr. Derringham, have you any conception of the hardness of the Nonconformist conscience? A nether millstone is cotton wool to it! Wrong—judged and condemned *as* wrong—demands fire and brimstone, and the 'worm that never dies,' and all the horrors that only true piety can paint as its avenger!"

"That's the uncle! What about the brother? Twins are supposed to be devoted?"

"This must be the rare case that means exception. These brothers seem as antagonistic as Charles and Joseph Surface. One all careless good-humour, generosity, and recklessness; the other—well, two words paint him: Canting hypocrite!"

"I thought so. I watched his face."

"I believe he knows something that would have

saved the boy. That he could have spoken but he wouldn't. He wanted him disgraced, and he wanted him out of the way."

"Love complications?"

"Exactly. The everlasting she, who from birth to burial plays havoc with men's lives!"

"We are both—safe—so far, I presume?" said Aubrey. "A married man wouldn't have said that."

"No. I'm no Benedict, and have no desire to become one. As for you—" he looked round. "You're wise if you know when you're well off."

"I hope I do know it. On the other hand empty vices don't appeal. I shun morning reflections, and the chorus of musical comedy spells only—inanity."

"Yet you're young enough for a loose end or two?"

"Oh, I don't set up as a moral example! It's my fault I suppose that I'm so easily bored, and that human nature interests me more as a study than an incentive."

"A study. Is it that? If you followed a profession like mine——"

"Blame indolence, and the absurd conventions of family pride. A new family, a double edition of pride."

"You do—nothing, I suppose?"

"I specialize a little in travelling, but there's not a quarter of the habitable globe without its

hotel, and its telephone. I'm thirty years of age—today, and I confess the problem of *cui bono* is the bogey of my present, possibly of my future——”

“Is that why you sought distraction in the Law Courts?” asked Myers.

“One reason. Yes . . . I've been worrying myself over the result ever since. I expected an interest, I've gained an experience.”

“How is that?”

“Something about that boy appealed to me. It wasn't only his youth, his good looks, but that sense of thoughtless innocence baiting a trap that has closed upon him. I seemed suddenly confronted by a problem of Life. I wanted to solve it. I asked myself how such things could be, and why? It looks as if a fiendish calculation was at work behind the regulated machinery of our civilized habits. Setting all precedent at naught; mocking at safeguards as at moral standards.”

“One could almost believe it,” agreed Myers, “if one pursued the subject deeply enough. In the present case, this of Geoffrey Gale, we both seem to have arrived at the same conclusion though we travelled there by different routes. I can't tell you how gratified I am at finding someone who shares my opinion.”

“Illogically, I presume?” said Aubrey.

“I'm not so sure of that. You pay *me* the honour of convincing you as you heard no direct evidence.”

"That's true. But I fancy the boy himself had something to do with it."

"You did not, by any chance, see the young lady, Miss Jessop—cousin of the brothers?" enquired Myers.

"I only saw a girlish figure, and a big black hat. Why do you ask?"

"Perhaps to find if any other influence is at work," smiled the young barrister, as he rose and pushed aside his chair.

"Rest assured there isn't," said his host, also rising. "Must you go? I'm sorry. I hope this first meeting isn't our last."

"I hope so also. This is my address. I live in the Temple. I find I can work better there. Give me a look in any day after five, if you're ever in such an unfashionable direction."

They shook hands. Aubrey conducted Myers to the outer door, and then returned to his comfortable room, and the perusal of the last post.

"I don't feel quite as bored as usual tonight," he said to himself. "But tomorrow, I suppose, it will all come back. Flat, stale, unprofitable! If only I hadn't come up against this blank wall. If I could *do* anything for that boy, but, of course, I can't. The Law's got him hard and fast."

He turned out the electric light, and sauntered into his bedroom. There flashed into his mind one of those seemingly inconsequent memories that at times surprise us. The lines of a schoolboy recitation; a reminiscence of schoolboy days—

*“And Eugene Aram walked between,
With gyves upon his wrist.”*

That was the fate of Geoffrey Dale. The fate of once bright happy boyhood. To be shut fast between prison walls, spending tonight with the memory of that cruel sentence ringing in his ears—
“Two years penal servitude.”

Aubrey FitzJohn slept badly.

Towards morning he had a strange dream. He seemed to be standing amidst bleak grey moorland, stretching either side of bare heights, under a grey sky. Huge blocks of quartz and granite lay scattered around as if thrown up by some fierce explosion, or some under-world force. And as he stood, and looked around, he saw a chain of human beings moving in linked apathy towards the blocks. They commenced to hew at them with queer pointed axes. He seemed to hear the monotonous blows, to watch the rise and fall of the various arms. No one spoke. Two by two the gang worked, and two by two the scattered warders watched their efforts. It was a weird sight. Grey sky, grey moor, grey figures. Suddenly the whole space grew misty and indistinct. A sort of curtain veiled the intervening spaces and shrouded the chained groups. He strained his eyes, but could see nothing. He tried to move, but his feet seemed paralysed. Then he became conscious of something approaching through the mist. A

rush of rapid feet; hoarse breathing. He *felt* rather than saw that the approaching figure had discovered him. His legs were clasped by chained hands. Something crouched at his feet; a sobbing voice besought mercy. The face was hidden, but the voice sounded familiar. Aubrey was suddenly wide awake, and it was ringing in his ears. "*Don't give me up! I'm innocent!*"

Sitting bolt upright in his bed he stared at the lemon-coloured sunlight filtering through a screen of silk draperies. He rubbed his eyes; he told himself it was but a dream born of the disturbances of the previous day.

He flung himself back on the pillows, and glanced at his watch. Only seven o'clock! It was annoying to wake so early, and so completely, for he felt that sleep was effectually banished. He must lie awake and think, or stop awake and read. He always kept a book or two by his bedside. He stretched out a hand, and took the nearest volume. It was the last novel of D'Annunzio's. Aubrey remembered he had begun to read it the previous day. Chaffey had also remembered the fact. As he opened it some newspaper cuttings fell out. He took up one, and an exclamation escaped him. Chaffey again! He had taken the trouble of cutting out the Case of Geoffrey Gale from the first hearing to the verdict. It was a concise and complete history ready for Aubrey to peruse.

He did peruse it from beginning to end. He wondered no longer at the verdict. The summing

up was directed to guilt. A harsh, cold, biassed speech, that could not but influence the minds of a British jury. Yet throughout the whole sordid tale Aubrey wondered what had tied the prisoner's tongue. Why he could not have cleared up certain facts that might have thrown more favourable light on his actions? There was something "mulish" about the boy's proceedings. Something that had prejudiced the "twelve good men and true" on whom his fate depended.

Aubrey finished the last paragraph. Re-read that passionate exclamation, learnt how "the prisoner had been hurried off under the charge of the warders," and felt again that someone had blundered seriously. He threw the papers down, and clasping his hands behind his head, gave himself up to thought.

His dream came back with an added significance. The fact of opening his eyes on a fresh day in no way relieved his mind of that previous obsession. His vision of the figure flying to him through mist and obscurity, clasping him in frenzy, entreating aid, was a vivid remembrance. He summoned Chaffey before his usual hour in order to gain distraction. No previous experience had ever affected him in such a manner. He was unable to account for it.

"It's not as if I were a philanthropist. I don't think I've ever done much good to my fellow-man," he reflected. "I took Chaffey as a freak. It amused me to watch his daily wonder at my un-

suspicious attitude. My carelessness in the matter of loose silver and sleeve links. The experiment has been a success, still, I don't see where a second enterprise of the sort could land me. . . . That poor chap—I suppose he's feasting on skilly, washing his cell, making his bed, and here am I luxuriating in comfort that I've done little to deserve!"

Chaffey entered with tea and its morning accompaniments, and Aubrey opened the usual morning discussion.

"Thoughtful of you to cut out those press reports," he said. "I suppose there's nothing new today?"

"No, sir, not a word. That's the way, sir, with the press. They piles up an interest, and then drops it."

Aubrey took the steaming cup of tea, and sipped it with lazy enjoyment.

"You'll be surprised to hear," he said, "that I met last night the very counsel who defended young Gale. More, I brought him here to talk matters over. He is quite convinced of the boy's innocence."

"Yet he couldn't get him off, sir?"

"No; nor will there be an appeal. The boy's fate is sealed for two years. I wonder what life will mean for him—afterwards? I suppose prison discipline hasn't a—softening effect, upon one's sensibilities, Chaffey?"

"It depends, sir. Some takes it hard, and some

is resigned, and some, of course, gets credited with ill-health, and have only light tasks. But there's those as rebels from first hour to last. Rebels, and suffers, and plots escapes, and revenge. You see, sir, it's harder to suffer injustice than to bear what one's deserved."

"Plot and *plan* escapes," repeated Aubrey. "Do prisoners often escape, Chaffey?"

"Not often, sir. Specially from Portland, or Dartmoor. They say no one ever *has* really got off from either one o' them. You've never seen a big prison p'raps, sir?"

"No, Chaffey."

Aubrey put down his cup, and sat up. "Do you think it would interest me to visit one?"

"I can't say, sir. I only thought that as you'd taken up this—hobby—ain't it, sir?"

"We'll leave it at that, Chaffey."

"Well, sir, bein' interested in criminal law, and queer cases, you might like to see the sort o' place they criminals get put away in?"

"Would I be able to get into one of those prisons, Chaffey?"

"If you've got influence, sir. You could apply to the Home Secretary. Of course you'd have to give a reason. You might say you wanted to inspect 'em for a political purpose, or that you were going to write a book. Lord Dulcimer bein' in the Upper House, it wouldn't be difficult, sir."

"I declare you're a genius, Chaffey! Why did I never think of this before?"

"I'm proud, sir, to do anything that 'ud make you take a real interest in life, so to say. It has hurt me, sir, to see you so bored, and so indifferent to everything. Excuse the freedom o' speech, sir, but you've give me leave to say out what's in my mind."

"Yes. It's good for you. As for my boredom, well, you've done more to relieve it than any one I know. It's a queer thing to say to one's valet—but then I'm by way of being queer, eh, Chaffey? Give me my cigarette case, and I'll think over your suggestion. I—I suppose Geoffrey Gale won't be sent to one of those prisons you mentioned, just yet?"

"I can't say, sir. But the barrister gentleman would be able to tell you."

"I suppose he would. But he might wonder at my curiosity. In fact he did wonder at it. You see I don't know those people. If any one of them had been a personal acquaintance, my interest wouldn't have seemed so remarkable."

Chaffey was silent. He had nothing more to suggest, nor could he see what use his master could make of further information. The case was over and done with. The prisoner's fate sealed. Penal servitude was a hard fate to face any one so young, but the Law has a long arm and a sharp claw. Geoffrey Gale was safe in its clutches. There he must remain for the proscribed period unless good behaviour, or ill-health, got him a shorter term.

Chaffey knew enough of rigorous penal discipline

to know also how rich a crop of sickness, insanity, and desperation it produced. He had heard many a sordid tale; seen more than one broken-down "lifer." He knew how promising careers might be wrecked, moral integrity abandoned, good intentions abolished, and the seeds of future ill-doing sown in reckless hearts. Not to many "gaol birds" is a helping hand outstretched. Few there are who find it possible to establish a new record; to wipe the smirch off the slate, and start afresh on life's highroad.

"Once a criminal, always a criminal" is the accepted verdict of conviction, and it is little wonder that prison records teem with repetitions of crime, instead of justifying a system that should abolish it.

Aubrey Derringham took his morning bath, and made his usual toilet, and then suddenly recognized that the routine of his life was disorganized.

A taste for criminal subjects had taken the place of fashionable pleasures. To stroll past the Motor Mile, to lunch at his Club, to visit his tailor, to take his car at reckless speed forty or fifty miles out of London, by way of getting an appetite for dinner, to sample the *chefs* of the Ritz, or the Carlton, to "do" a play, or make one of a crush to witness the last contortions of fashionable waltzing, these occupations had seemed hitherto to fill up the day's programme.

But as he surveyed them in turn he found that

the "motor spin" through the sweet spring country alone tempted his leisure. He swept aside lunch engagements with indifference. He ordered the car to be ready at twelve o'clock, and prepared to be his own driver.

"I'm a bit out of practice," he told Chaffey, as he ventured mild remonstrance. "I mean to work it up again. One feels more independent when one drives oneself."

So he attired himself in leather and goggles, and got into the long low touring car whose "records" had nearly brought him into various county courts. Then cautiously and cleverly he steered through outlying traffic and congested suburbs, and so away to the Surrey hills, with Chaffey watchful and admonitory by his side.

They spoke very little. Speed and an open car are not conducive to conversation. But the queer valet noted something was "up" with his master. Some subject, or plan, was engrossing him, independently of his pride in his car, and the speed limit.

"It ain't my business," thought this student of human nature. "But I could give a pretty good guess what's in his mind."

CHAPTER IV

“A SYSTEM—AND ITS PRINCIPLES”

AUBREY FITZJOHN DERRINGHAM accepted another invitation to the Daniel Schultzes' in the hopes of again meeting Joshua Myers. It was to a Sunday luncheon, and Mrs. Schultze was posing as a devoted mother for the benefit of an effete Dukelet, whom she had purloined for the occasion.

The usual luxury, the usual perfection of food and service gave the usual advertisement of successful Jewish finance. The Dukelet, a youth of twenty-two, who was an impoverished and fatherless orphan, seemed to have fallen an easy prey to the beautiful Miriam. He had appraised her charms as scarcely secondary to Gertie Ellerslie, of musical comedy fame, but her conversation as vastly inferior. The girl was too well educated for flippancy; her slang had a touch of epigram.

Aubrey Derringham shelved his young Grace by his usual cool method of appropriation. He learnt that Myers was expected to drop in either to lunch, or after.

“He nearly always comes to us on Sundays,” said Miriam. “How did you get on?” she added.

"He is interesting," said Aubrey, "and very clever. I should think he had a career before him."

"Oh—that of course!" said his cousin. "K. C. and then—Judgeship. It's all on the cards. Are you interested in politics, Mr. Derringham?"

"I can't say I am."

"But your brother is in the House. I read a speech of his not long ago."

"He'd be flattered I'm sure," said Aubrey. "It's more than I've ever done. Politics are only another word for self-seeking. No politician can afford a larger outlook on national demands than his party permits. Besides—they make you feel that life is a mere table of statistics, and men and women mere decimal fragments of parliamentary arithmetic."

The girl laughed. "It sounds clever, but it's rather cruel. I am an Imperialist at heart, and I like to think the legislators of the country do their best for its honour and welfare."

"We all like to think that," he agreed. "But very few of us believe it. Ah, there is your cousin!"

The Dukelet seized the opportunity, and took the seat his temporary rival had vacated.

"Fancy your talking to a political Johnnie," he remarked facetiously, and his eyes followed Aubrey in wide amazement. "Why—it's a *man* he's left you for!"

"Don't crush me," said Miriam. "And don't fancy I mind being left—for such a man."

"Who is he?" asked the youth. "Looks——"

“Jewish? You’d better say it. I know it was in your mind. He is a cousin of mine, and on the way to—achieve great things.” She rose. “Mother’s going down now. Will you come?”

“May I sit next you?”

“If you wish. But I warn you ‘the political Johnnie’ will be on the other side.”

She threw him a glance which he translated as the “glad eye,” and said a word to Myers and to Aubrey which placed them next each other and near herself.

It was a very brilliant luncheon, for Mrs. Schultze was a very clever woman and dispensed popularity, as well as attracted it. Finance was, of course, represented in its heaviest and most enterprising aspect; the very courses breathed out “shekels,” but plutocratic importance was so much the trend of the age that even the young Dukelet was ready to promise his name to a Board of Directors.

Aubrey Derringham found the rising barrister an even more delightful companion than at their last meeting. On that occasion his pride had been overshadowed by an unsuccessful case. Today he was brimming over with the importance of a brilliant achievement on some technical point that promised an infinitude of “briefs.” It was not easy to bring him down to the level of prison life, its rigours, and its deeply hidden mysteries. But Aubrey had come for a purpose, and worked for it manfully.

It surprised him a little when after one of his questions, Myers showed a sudden change of front. He took the subject right out of his questioner's hands, went into it, summed up wrongs and rights, errors and possibilities. Then—it was as if he laid it flat and clean on the table before him, and said, "Now, do you mind telling me *why* you want to know all this?"

Aubrey was rather taken aback. The question was so direct, the brilliant eyes so penetrating.

"'Pon my word," he said, "I hardly know. I happened to take up a book on prison life the other day, and I remembered that I had never seen such a place."

"It's a queer museum of human curiosities. Not a pleasant place, believe me. There's something rather—terrifying, in being confronted by the criminal side of existence. The endeavour to place your fellow-man before your mental vision as an expert in deeds your own mind scarcely conceives as committable. Every tree has a crooked branch. That of life can't expect to be exclusive."

"Do you think reformation possible? I mean is the type the result of environment, or the effects of a wrong system?"

"Both. The upbringing and the sordid misery of one class turn it into a monster fighting for its rights; demanding equal share in the world's good things. It can't argue, it can't reason. It has only a brutal hatred of the better class, a

brutal envy of the ease and comfort it doesn't possess; and that it could never do anything but abuse if it did possess. We have had vast cyclonic upheavals; towns and cities destroyed in a moment of nature's fury. I sometimes wish she would turn her attention to our criminal class and their *habitat*. Sweep them aside, avalanche them, burn them on one gigantic pyre, and leave the world free and clean, and able to breathe peace and good will to a new race."

"But there are innocent victims of the system. Would you give them no chance of repenting?"

"The innocent victim is branded to his life's end by the searing iron of error. The principle of a system is its own worst enemy. It can't afford to condemn what it discovers to be inefficient."

"You'll think I'm unusually pertinacious," said Aubrey. "But I'd like to ask one more question. If you, or some legal official equally responsible, *knew* that a man was suffering unjustly, *knew* that this system would have an injurious effect upon his life, would you try to—well, to help him? I mean would it be against your conscience to do it?"

"There you have me," said Myers seriously. "Speaking as an upholder of the majesty of the Law, I could not disobey its orders. Speaking as a man compassionating a fellow-man, I would do my very utmost; even at attendant risks! It's a very serious matter you know, Mr. Derringham——"

“What are you two discussing so gravely?” interrupted Miriam’s voice. “You might be conspirators, by your appearance! Mr. Derringham, you’ve been offered orange salad for the past two minutes. If you don’t want it, pass it on.”

Aubrey apologized, and helped himself to the delicacy in question. After which Miriam demanded his attention, and kept it till her mother gave the signal for departure.

“Come up and smoke on the balcony, it’s quite private,” she called out. “And it will be more companionable than the sheep-and-goat business.”

The invitation meant a general movement for such of the guests as were remaining. Aubrey and Myers were among them. The astute barrister had begun to ask himself what could be the reason for the young man’s extraordinary interest in criminal matters. Today’s discussion on prisons, and prison life, following up their previous discussion on Geoffrey Gale’s conviction, seemed to hint at something beyond casual interest. Yet Aubrey Derringham had only gone to the Law Courts on chance. He had no personal interest in the forgery case; not even an acquaintance with any of the parties concerned in it.

It seemed odd, but the very oddity attracted Myers. He began to wonder whether Aubrey Derringham had ever done anything that might have brought him into such a position as Geoffrey Gale’s? Was there some mystery in the background of his own life?

Queer things lurked behind the respectability of those exclusive chambers in the Albany. Odd stories had circulated; now and then a scandal had leaked out. Sybarite manhood hugged queer company to itself in the seclusion of bachelor freedom. Art had strange ideals, and its followers were not always what the outside veneer pretended. Could it be that his new friend was hovering on the brink of an exploding episode, or inculpated by reason of moral weakness in the meshes of some ghastly secret?

Myers looked at the pale, clear-cut face, the indolent eyes, the air of ease and good breeding so distinctive of Aubrey Derringham. All and each gave denial to any imagining connected with the wild comedies of aristocratic life. Aubrey's own confession had been that of the onlooker, impelled by curiosity, and withheld by indolence. He had lived in the world, watched and shared some of its stage play, but neither fierce grief nor hungry passion had developed the emotional side of his nature. And he was thirty years of age. Thirty—and more interested in a boy's blundering crime than in any woman's charm or loveliness.

Queer. But yet interesting. The fact of its queerness made it that, and Joshua Myers found himself inclined to watch results. This unusual sympathy with purely impersonal matters was a study in that book of human characteristics which daily opened fresh leaves to his ambitious soul.

The wild comedy of life! What revelations it

brought, what secrets it held. What untold, and untellable, interest. And each of these meant a stepping-stone to that career he had mapped out. Each was a rung on the ladder of success. His busy mind ascended to imagined heights even as he smoked cigarettes with Aubrey Derringham, and listened to the banalities of the little Duke with whom Miriam Schultze was flirting outrageously.

The result of Myers' frank revelations showed itself later when Aubrey Derringham found himself the possessor of a letter to the Governor of Portland Prison. Only when he received the permit to go over the huge citadel safeguarding British subjects did he question himself as to its significance. Why visit such a place? Why peer into the inner sanctuary of legal mystery typified by legal penalties? It would not raise his estimate of his fellow-man, it would only introduce him to a certain section of society "under a cloud," and environed by conditions that to the free and law-abiding citizen were incredible hardships.

He discussed the matter with Chaffey, but received little encouragement. As a reformed character the queer valet shunned everything connected with police espionage.

"It'll look different to you, sir," he allowed. "P'raps you'll be surprised at the accommodation, and feedin,' and rules. I've heard visitors say we were too well treated; and it was no wonder we

tried to get back. Silly talk, sir! No one 'ud ever *want* to go back, unless life was made too hard for him after he got out."

"I think I'll go to Portland," said Aubrey. "I shall motor down to Weymouth, and put up at a hotel, and go over the prison next morning."

"Will you be wanting me, sir?"

"Can the car be trusted?"

"Certainly, sir. And you'll pass heaps of towns with motor works. No fear of a breakdown."

"All right, then I'll dispense with your services. I suppose," he added carelessly, "you've not heard where that poor young fellow has been sent?"

"Not to Portland, sir."

Aubrey started slightly. "Why did you say that?"

"Beg pardon, sir, no offence. I just happened to hear he was still at the Scrubs, and you're goin' further afield."

"He's been there a month, hasn't he?"

"Yes, sir. Might I take the liberty of adding another bit of information, sir? The curate brother has gone to a parish in South Devon. And he's goin' to be married to the young lady, Miss Jessop, in a few months."

"You've found out that!"

"It came round to me, sir, in a manner o' speaking. I have friends in Manchester, sir."

"I understand. . . . You don't happen to know the name of that Devonshire parish, I suppose?"

"I could find out, sir. I rather fancy the uncle put it into one o' them ere Christian papers, as prints sermons, and has queer advertisements."

Aubrey laughed. "It seems that the Non-conformist conscience isn't above a pardonable pride in worldly achievements, or indifferent to secular advantage!"

"You'd like to know the parish, sir?"

"I should. Also, if by your indirect methods you could find out what Miss Jessop is like, and whether this—marriage, is one of inclination it might add to the interest of the story."

"Story, sir?"

"You advised embryo authorship as a reason for my curiosity respecting government offices. It seems to me there is a very fair opening chapter, dating from my visit to the Law Courts. How does it strike you, Chaffey?"

"I never can make out, sir, whether you're laughing, or in earnest. Writing books isn't easy, I should say. I'd leave it to them as *has* to do it for a living, if I was you, sir."

"Perhaps you're right. Still it isn't every author who gets hold of a human document. Truth *is* stranger than fiction, you know."

"Stranger, sir, perhaps, but not so pleasant to read about."

"Go and put the car in order," said his master. "And get me a road map. I'll start this afternoon and come back tomorrow night. Take a holiday, Chaffey. You deserve it."

"Thank you, sir. But my life here seems all holiday. There's nothing to tempt me away, sir, unless you'd like me to run up to—Manchester?"

"Why Manchester?"

"I thought, sir, that the young lady, and her intended marriage, had some interest for you?"

"The young lady represents a big black hat, and a loose wave of fair hair. That's all I've seen of her."

"Exactly, sir. But there's more interest in what one *doesn't* see, than in what one does. Leastwise where women is concerned."

"You're a rip, Chaffey! I shall have to remonstrate seriously with you."

"No, sir. The sex has no attractions for me. I wouldn't exchange your service, sir, not for anything in petticoats."

"Flattering to the sex. But I don't want to put you to the test, Chaffey."

The valet paused at the door. His face was imperturbable as ever.

"Am I to go to Manchester, sir? You didn't say?"

"Go—where you like, man! If it pleases you to play amateur detective, one place is as good as another."

"Not exactly, sir. But having started the matter in London, it seems a pity to drop it. I think I did find a—a object of interest for you, sir, at last."

"Confound you! I'm inclined to wish you hadn't."

“I’m sorry for that, sir. But if I may be excused for reminding you, you sort of put it to me, sir, to do something to rouse you to real things.”

“Well, this is real enough. And I suppose having started an interest I must prove whether it will continue interesting?”

“I think it will, sir. I’ll go and see to the car myself, if you don’t want anything more?”

“All right.”

“There’s road maps in the writing table drawer, sir, left hand. Weymouth’s about a hundred and twenty-eight miles. What time shall the car come round, sir?”

“About two-thirty,” answered his master carelessly, as he opened the drawer indicated.

The door closed, and he remained standing there staring at the lines and names of the route indicated. He folded the map again, and for a moment stood looking round his room; its harmonious proportions, its artistic colouring, its generous company of books which filled the low shelves around the walls.

He took a turn up and down, asking himself if he was not a fool to desert such comfort and such company? For in his mind a conviction was growing that the object in life he had so long desired might become more imperative in its demands than at first seemed possible. Yet it struck him as in keeping with his various idiosyncrasies that he should have taken up the case of a

stranger as more important than the social eccentricities of personal friends.

“Any one would think I was mad,” he said, bringing his walk and his reflections to an abrupt halt. “Well—don’t scientists say we’re all *that*, on one point or other. I suppose, if I really wished to sift this matter out, I’d go to those relatives of the boy, in Manchester, and find out if there was any animus against him, or any hope of clearing up the mystery? As it is I’m investigating His Majesty’s strongholds of crime on a plausible excuse, and with a view to discovering whether the punishment is deserving of the offence!”

CHAPTER V

“HIS STEP SEEMED LIGHT AND GAY”

AUBREY DERRINGHAM took occasional “twenty-mile” spurts out of his car, when a clear road, and no disturbing traffic, tempted him. He had a brief rest at Salisbury, and started fresh and keen over rolling plain and Roman roads by way of Blandford and Dorchester.

The sea spread like a glittering web below the cliffs, as he at last dropped from the heights, and followed the steep road to the curve of the bay. He then drove along the esplanade. The clean old-fashioned town was basking in the glow of sunset. The sands and promenade were thronged with holiday folk. At the end of the long sea frontage he could see the heights of the Nothe, and the outlying “Bill” of Portland. He slowed down, and then drew up at the Gloucester. Having engaged a room, and delivered his car to the mercies of the garage, there remained only to bathe, and dress, and dine.

The long hours in the open air had braced his energies and sharpened his appetite. He secured a table in the window, and glanced round at the

various occupants of the dining-room. There were not many. The usual British family party who cling to hotel comforts on an annual holiday, and a few scattered individuals who might be of naval or military importance. That was all. The stout mother and over-dressed daughters threw glances of curiosity at the solitary young man in his correct evening dress, and with that air of detachment from his surroundings that marked him from the tourist proper. Possibly they were indulging hopes of acquaintanceship with someone who had scribbled "Hon. A. FitzJohn Der-
ringham" in the visitor's book, and had driven himself in his own car from London.

Dinner over, Aubrey sauntered out on the esplanade, and strolled along to the harbour. A beguiling boatman induced him to take a row round the Nothe headland which forms the southern point of the harbour. From there he could see Portland lying like a crouched lion in its impregnable lair. The Government dockyards, and the curious stretch of the Chesil Beach showed dimly under the clear sky, and by the illumination of the vessels and warships in the Roads. Aubrey found his boatman communicative. He had lived in the place for thirty years. He knew all the points of interest, and discussed submarines and destroyers and training ships with his passenger.

Aubrey questioned him as to the great prison frowning in gloomy isolation on the heights above. It surprised him to learn that a complete town

lay at the base of that rocky tableland. A place of many inhabitants, shops, gardens, dwelling places. Commerce and life rejoicing in immunity from the rigours and horrors above. From the edge of the town stretched that mysterious and most dangerous ridge called the Chesil Beach.

"Pebbles and stones for seventeen miles," said Aubrey's informant. "And forty feet high, sir. No one can say how it came there, and the pebble varies in size from a potato to a horse bean. You can walk on the top of the ridge right along to Bridport. Not that I'd be advisin' it, sir. If any one does try they find they've had enough walking for the rest o' their nat'ral life."

"Do the convicts ever try to escape?" enquired Aubrey.

"They has tried, now and then. But it never comes off, sir. No one could get away from there. You'll see for yourself if you're thinkin' o' visitin' the prison."

"Do many people visit it?" asked Aubrey.

"Oh, yes, sir. Heaps on 'em. I don't know what interests 'em. It's a fearful high hill to climb to begin with, and you can't see much o' the convicts as they do all of the stone quarrying within the walls. And there's warders everywhere. And if so be as any one walks two or three times past the gates he's watched with suspicion. I've 'eard there was an escape attempted about five or six years ago. The man got off in a fog, and somehow made his way down through the town, and to the

Chesil Beach. Some says he was caught, and some that he fell into Deadman's bay, as 'tis called. I couldn't rightly say what happened. They keeps such things dark of course, sir. Myself I don't see how any one could escape what with them cliffs on one side and armed warders at signal boxes all the way to the road, and no way of getting off save through the town, where, of course, the dress 'ud give 'em away. A cousin of mine is one of the warders up there. Terrible monot'nus the life. He says as 'ow he nearly goes off his chump sometimes. You'll see the Church if you goes up there, sir. Saint Peter's. All built by the prisoners. Stone work, carving, everything. Surprisin' what they *can* do when they've a mind for honest work. They 'ave a choice o' eight or nine trades, I've been told, and the workshops is something wonderful."

Aubrey listened with increasing interest. It was new to hear that prison life had its ambitions and compensations. He had pictured chained gangs at hard and toilsome labour. It seemed strange to learn of individual choice, and lighter forms of workmanship than stone breaking.

He remained on the water till ten o'clock, encouraging his loquacious friend to tell him all he knew of the place so beloved by George III. and turned by a royal whim into a fashionable seaside resort. That its glories had departed was evident. The South coast had sprung into favour without drawing Weymouth into any remarkable prominence. But it had a charm of its own that May

night as the moon silvered the old stone houses, and the quiet waters reflected the lights of yachts and steamboats.

Aubrey paced slowly to and fro before the hotel front, enjoying the change from London turmoil. The crowd of pleasure seekers had left the sands; the band had ceased playing. The air was deliciously cool and soft.

"How much we sacrifice for pleasure," he reflected. "If it is pleasure, to eat unwholesome food, and too much of it, and stand for hours in crowded rooms listening to a babel of voices, or attempting to steer through a giddy romp called 'dancing.' And then the Club, and the last scandal, and the last unnecessary drink, and home to sleep away the morning hours, and get up and dress, and go through it all again! No one the better for it all, many very much the worse!"

Yet despite the philosophical reflections he suddenly asked himself why he was idling *here*; what reason he could give for such a freakish enterprise? It seemed as if the Aubrey Derringham he knew had become a stranger desiring fresh introduction. He paced to and fro and looked over the sea and across to that crouching headland. To what trouble he had gone for a mere whim. For the sake of following up a phase of life hitherto unknown and unknowable.

It was unaccountable, if he tried conventional explanations, but when he looked at it from the

standpoint of the importance of human life it took on another aspect. He turned from the view of curving bay and walked slowly towards the end of the promenade. It was almost deserted. He passed the stiff row of lodging houses, and came to an asphalted walk and some modern pleasure grounds with seats and tennis courts.

Before him lay the old coastguard station, and above under the young moon rolled the great sloping downs; chalky patches like the white crests of waves breaking the green monotony of their bare expanse. He could trace the great equestrian figure on the slope, supposed to be that of royal George on horseback, paying the town the doubtful compliment of turning his back on it. Farther on came gardens of modern houses sloping down to the cliff walk. Low iron railings separated them from publicity. Some of the windows opened on a verandah or a terrace, and the rooms within could be seen distinctly.

As Aubrey passed along he noted one room. It was lit by a gas pendant over its centre table, and sitting at the table, her head bent on her hands, was a girl. Before her lay a heap of newspapers. She seemed the only occupant of the room. Something in her attitude and the drooping lines of her figure spoke of dejection or trouble. Involuntarily Aubrey stopped and gazed without thought of intrusion. He saw her lift her head, and dry her eyes with her handkerchief. Then she rose and seemed to call out an answer to some

enquiry. He heard the clear tones of her voice: "I'm coming directly."

She raised her arm, extinguished the light, and came to the open window. A moment she stood there, her white gown showing against the darkness, then she ran out and over the green stretch of lawn and so to the edge of the railings.

Aubrey started, suddenly conscious of a breach of good manners in thus intruding upon another person's privacy. He was moving on, but the girl called softly through the dusk: "George, is it you?"

"No," he answered impulsively.

She leant over the railings. "I—oh, I'm sorry! I was expecting a friend. I thought——"

"I was lingering here, tempted by the beauty of the evening," said the young man. "Is it a private road? I'm a stranger to the place."

"No," she said, "it's not private. This is a new part of Weymouth; the road goes on to the coastguard station."

"I've strolled further than I intended," said Aubrey. "But this bay is a good excuse."

"It is very beautiful," she answered, but the tone of dejection was evident in the words, and rendered them meaningless. He felt he had no excuse for lingering there, or continuing conversation, and yet he wanted to see the face of the speaker. It was in shadow; its outline was youthful; but the hair and colouring were vague. The simple white dress clung about a slender shape,

and that slenderness and youth made him curious as to the special trouble her previous attitude had signified.

Was it connected with a love affair? Was "George," the expected, its hero, and was a broken appointment the cause of those tears he had unwittingly beheld?

Her voice broke over his silence in frank and simple curiosity.

"You said you were a stranger. Have you come to stay, or are you merely waiting for the Channel boat?"

"The Channel boat," he echoed vaguely.

"Jersey and Guernsey. Many people stay a night before crossing."

"Oh, yes, of course! But I'm not crossing. I've only motored down from town to have a look at Portland. I'm staying at the Gloucester."

She repeated the word—"Portland?" Then asked: "Are you interested in that?"

"Not specially. But I happen to have an order, and I've never seen a convict prison, that's all!"

"A convict prison!" He saw the white fingers close over the dark rail against which she stood. "It's very horrid! One can't get away from it if one lives here. I—I *hate* it! . . . From my window I see it, always lying out there, a hateful, hideous thing! Always reminding one of horrors! The men come in gangs. I've seen them at the station—brought here. I've seen them taken away to other places as cruel. Ever since I was

a little child this place has been associated with those chained gangs; those sullen figures; the hopelessness of it all!"

He was silent.

"It's bad enough," she went on, "when one only looks at it, as a stranger, unconcerned with one of those fettered souls, but——"

She broke off suddenly. Aubrey Derringham's thoughts pictured the weeping figure, the scattered papers, the sad young voice.

"I hope," he said gently, "that the meaning of Portland is not a personal one—for you?"

"Personal? You mean that any one I know . . . Oh, no! Thank God! There's no one there—not yet . . ."

The disjointed fragments of speech were sharply detached; the tone of her voice had grown harsher. Aubrey felt he ought to take his leave; that he had no right to be here carrying on a conversation with an unknown girl, in a strange place, at an unconventional hour. And yet he lingered. That queer "*not yet*," seemed pregnant with foreboding. And the girl herself was labouring under stress of excitement that made her self-revealing.

"Not yet? I hope such a fate may never befall you."

"Oh!" she cried suddenly. "It has! It has!"

Like a bow overstrung her strength gave way; she was clinging to the railings and weeping in the heart-broken desperate fashion of a child who has never learnt to control an emotion.

Aubrey Derringham was perplexed. This was a situation for which experience had no precedent. He stood there helpless before a storm he had unconsciously raised. He was terribly distressed.

"Pray, pray, don't cry so!" he said, in that foolish man-consoling fashion, which seems to look upon feminine emotion as a supply fitted with special taps to be turned off at will. "I'm sorry if I said anything——"

"Oh, no, it wasn't *you!*" She spoke between sobbing breaths. "I don't know who you are! I don't care! Aren't there times when one seems to get straight out of conventional swaddling bands? When all the ordinary petty things look—just petty? When one wants to speak out just as one feels and thinks?"

"Yes," he said.

"And that's how I felt, and feel! I'm in great trouble and—it's partly my own fault. That doesn't help though, does it? But I was expecting, hoping for, someone who had promised to help, and—he hasn't come!"

"That d——d George!" thought Aubrey.

Aloud he said: "I know we're strangers. I know I haven't exactly the right to be keeping you here talking to me, but, as you say, circumstances are sometimes too strong for civilized artifices. Perhaps this is such an occasion? I wonder if I could be of any help to you? I wonder if I might say that I'd willingly be of such help if only—only you could trust me?"

"You've a nice voice," said the girl frankly. "I can't see your face distinctly, but your voice rings true. Would you mind—shaking hands?"

Somewhat surprised at the request Aubrey Derringham took the slender white hand frankly extended and clasped it as frankly.

She released his. "Thank you, that's all right. I always judge new acquaintances by the way they shake hands. There's *character* in it, you know. Your grasp is just right. Firm and assuring. I could trust you."

"Perhaps it's as well 'George' isn't here," thought Aubrey.

Aloud he said: "If you feel that, couldn't you tell me what's troubling you?"

"No," she said, "not tonight. I must go in. But tomorrow—I'll see you tomorrow—if you like?"

Aubrey remembered that he was returning to London, after going over the prison. But he only said: "What time?"

The girl debated a moment. Then she said: "Five o'clock. I'm staying here with an old governess. I used to come to her school. She's given it up, and lives there"—(nodding back to the house). "I'll meet you just beyond the road. Perhaps you will tell me about—the life inside those walls? I'd like to know."

Aubrey thought it a surprising announcement. But the whole adventure, if it deserved the name, was surprising. Even while her last words echoed

in his ears she was gone. A white slender shape flitting over the sward and melting into the shadows of the shadowy house. He heard the closing of the long French window, the turn of a key. Then, as he waited, a light flashed in a room above. He remembered what she had said about her window looking over to that menacing monster crouched low on its narrow neck of land. Was that her room? For a few moments he walked up and down the strip of asphalt, wondering if the echo of his steps was audible, half hoping she might raise the blind and look out. But nothing happened, and he at last retraced his steps to the hotel. Only when he reached it did he remember that they had had no clear vision of each other. That they were ignorant of names, or any identifying sign.

"But I think I'd know her," he said. "Even if a dozen other girls were strolling on that road. I suppose I'll not get back to town, unless I make a night journey of it."

He entered the hotel, took a whiskey and soda in the smoking-room, and then retired.

As he was unfastening a collar stud, one of those temperamental storms to which he was subject swept over his mind. "What the devil does it all mean? Why am I *here*? What am I letting myself in for? I, who *hate* girls!"

The more he thought of that meeting the less he could explain it. To his fastidious mind it seemed in the worst possible taste.

Talking to a girl over a wall like any seaside cad who dispenses with introduction; accepting the suggestion of a second meeting? Never in his life had he been guilty of actions so irregular, where a girl was concerned. With women of the fast and loose type it was different. They knew what they were about, they could take care of themselves. But—this girl was of a type hitherto unmet, and untabulated.

Why did she wish to meet a total stranger again? And who was the man she had expected to meet, and who had failed to keep his appointment? These questions buzzed in his brain as he took off his evening clothes and tossed them here and there. He forgot that the invaluable Chaffey was not at hand to brush, press, and fold. He almost forgot why he had come here at all. He was hearing a girl's voice; soothing a girl's grief, of whose source and nature he was ignorant; wondering about a face dimly seen, and which he was pledged to recognize by light of day.

And he was going to recognize it. He was going to find out what special grief, or perplexity, was racking that young heart, and had driven it to confide in a stranger.

CHAPTER VI

"DOWN THE IRON STAIR"

AUBREY DERRINGHAM learnt from the hall porter that he could take his car over to Portland, instead of going by train, and climbing the steep hill afterwards.

He ordered it round from the garage, and told the manageress he would retain his room for another night. Then he drove to the post-office, and wired to Chaffey that he was not returning to town as arranged. After which he set forth for that visit of inspection which had promised a new interest in his practically unoccupied life.

"Fortune's Well" seemed to him an ironical designation for the island's capital, and he glanced with some amusement at the piled-up houses, and steep sloping streets. The ascent went on and upwards to the Portland Arms, again of George III. importance. An impregnable fort with heavy guns showed itself on the left, but his way led still higher to that stretch of tableland with its network of quarries, its hideous machinery, and dreary grey loneliness. He slackened speed, and gazed around.

It was here that men had worked like dumb helpless brutes for desolate years. Here where the rough blood-stained criminal and the educated gentleman were linked together by common shame. Here where agonies of longing and tears of blood were alike unavailing to alter one rash act of a lifetime. Here too, perchance, innocence had worked by side of guilt and vainly prayed for release. Such things had been and would be again.

What a twisted web was life. How queer its patterns, how intermingled its threads and skeins!

He changed speed, and sent the car forward, past the narrow street of dingy houses and poor-looking inns, that fronted the high stone walls of the prison yards, where the men worked at what the quarrymen excavated. He saw the queer little sentry-boxes, each with its armed patrol, but of the convicts he saw nothing. The walls were too high. Only from some upper window of one of the houses, or inns, could the interior of the stone works be seen. He inquired for the Governor's house, and sent in his card and letter of introduction. He learnt that the official himself was over at the prison, but a subordinate, recognizing government seal and importance, conducted the visitor through the great iron gates, and left him in charge of a warder.

Aubrey Derringham looked around with vague curiosity. Presently the Governor came out and,

after a brief conversation, took him within the great building, and instructed another warder to conduct him over it.

For the next two hours Aubrey Derringham felt as if he had strayed into a new world. A place such as imagination, or invention, had never portrayed. A place of iron system, harsh rules, cold prudence, stern environment. Here, watched, guarded, controlled, were some eight hundred prisoned lives. Each condemned to some daily ordeal, more or less distasteful. Each chafing against the all iron bondage recklessly challenged, and henceforth the Nemesis of such recklessness. Here were criminals by reason of Fate, or environment, or heredity. Beings brutalized by nature's harsh laws, or life's unequal service. Men who passed him with scowling brows and lowered eyes. Men young, old, middle-aged. Some hardened by crime and proud of achievements, others trapped by force of circumstance, or led into error by one of those human passions that prey on men's souls, and wreck them for sheer malevolence of Destiny, so it would appear.

It was not the official's place to satisfy curiosity, or give more than general information, but Aubrey Derringham knew that the Majesty of the Law would be something more than a name to him henceforward.

It stood forth as a relentless Inquisition. A Force necessitated by the very Civilization it

safeguarded; the result of that civilization as well as its guardian.

He learnt of rules and discipline. Of the routine of life as these chained and lawless beings knew it. A routine unthinkable to his own experience, the fruits of penal economy, the carefully wrought machinery of State and policy. His interest grew along with his knowledge of facts. What he heard, what he saw, as he wandered from cell to cell, from kitchen to workshop, from chapel to infirmary, filled his mind to the exclusion of all else.

Chaffey had thrown side-lights of personal experience on the subject, but Chaffey had not been incarcerated for years in an impregnable fortress, where every locked gate, and chained door, and barred window spoke of despair and hopelessness. For to places like this came only the law's worst offenders. Men to whom life, or honour, or property were never sacred. Men who gloried in records of crime as others might glory in records of honourable industry.

Aubrey Derringham was conscious of sickness of heart as the last key grated into its lock. What must it be to enter such a place for the first time? What must it be to enter it conscious of wrongful conviction? Chafing, maddened, hopeless, as those fierce souls who risked death to escape, and sought death to end despair. He remembered the story of that prisoner implicated in a fraud, and made the scapegoat of more skilful accomplices. How he

had cursed and prayed and struggled and suffered with a memory of seventeen of such years ever before him. How one day passing along the gallery leading from one range of cells to another he had flung himself over before the horrified warder could fathom his intent.

"Suicide in a prison" seemed a fitting record for a desperate soul, unable to suborn human justice, or secure human aid.

"Yes, some on 'em takes it hard, precious hard," the warder had said. He had a twenty years' record of prison guardianship, and yet retained some human sympathy.

To him Aubrey Derringham had put that question as to possibilities of escape. A grim smile answered it. "Not from Portland, sir. Never from Portland."

And looking around, and listening to rules and regulations attending even "privileges" outside the gates, Aubrey felt the man was speaking the truth.

A verse haunted him; the inspiration of a soul desperate as these.

*"And down the iron stair we tramped
Each to his separate Hell."*

He recalled two words, spoken by that girl whom he was to meet in a few hours' time. "Not yet," she had said. Was someone whom she knew, for whom she was suffering, destined to this Hell? It

almost seemed so, judging from her grief and her strange words.

They shared a common interest. Possibly for that reason she desired to hear what he had learnt of this impregnable fortress and its hopelessness. He felt he could say nothing cheerful, nothing to alleviate any fear or anxiety on her part. He wondered vaguely who it was that she had expected with the news last night? Who it was to whom those two words applied so significantly? *Not yet.* He refused the Governor's proffered hospitality and returned to Weymouth. Making a detour of the outer boundary of the town he ran through Wyke and its ancient village. Then past the estuary and on to Abbotsbury. There he lunched, and then visited the famous Swannery. After that he returned to his car and drove back to the Gloucester. It was half-past four. He had time only to brush off dust and change his cap for a hat. Then, with a queer feeling of "doing the thing one ought not to do," he set off for his unconventional appointment.

The sky had clouded, and seemed to threaten rain. He walked briskly down the length of the Parade, and then took the inner road to the left of Grenville Gardens. Arrived at the end of the houses he looked down the long road skirting the sea, and extending to the old coastguard station. There were many figures walking, cycling, or sitting on the miniature pebble ridge which formed a sort of rampart to encroaching tides. He

paused and scrutinized them in turn. None offered any suggestion of the slim white-gowned girl who had asked him to meet her. A feeling of annoyance took the place of curiosity. Had she intended only to make a fool of him? Treat him as she would treat one of the seaside "bounders" who forced acquaintance on any girl they chanced to meet?

Yet it was she who had made the advance; who had proposed the meeting.

He sauntered slowly on, glancing at each figure he passed. Conscious of much criticism of many girls, yet convinced she was not one of them. On, and still on he walked; the sound of the sea in his ears, a sullen resentment in his heart.

Why had he promised to come? Why had he not carried out his original intention and returned to town? He looked at his watch and found it was a quarter past five. He turned back and retraced his steps. Perhaps he had come too far? She might be at the upper end where the gardens joined the road. His glance travelled far ahead of his feet, but no waiting figure showed itself. With a hot thrill of anger at his own folly Aubrey Derringham walked back to the Parade. "Serves me right for being such a fool!" he told himself, and vowed "never again" with all a man's hatred of such an experience. It was his first, and he owned the mature age of thirty. All the more reason to be angered and ashamed. That hand-clasp, that assurance of trust—what had they

meant? Less than nothing, so it seemed. He vainly tried to clothe that phantom of the night with any reality now that daylight and expectation had shown no sign of her.

Well, no matter. He would dine, and order the car, and return. He loved motoring at night when the roads were free, and police traps improbable. A sudden splash of rain however reminded him that storm and an open car did not exactly spell enjoyment. London was a hundred and thirty miles distant, and possibly Chaffey would not be at his room after receiving that morning's telegram. The Fates were against him for once. He had better make up his mind to remain, and start early the next morning. A run in the first cool sunny hours of the day was, if anything, more enjoyable than a moonlight journey without a moon.

His indecision lasted him through a drenching shower, and alternated with the smothered humiliation he vainly opposed. He went into the smoking-room and read the papers, and smoked innumerable cigarettes. The stout old gentleman, with the pretty wife and curious daughters, endeavoured to make conversation, but Aubrey Derringham was terse and unapproachable. He didn't want to talk to strangers. He felt he had nothing in common with Brummagem millionaires, and their local importance.

He left the smoking-room and went into the entrance hall. There he stopped suddenly. A

sense of relief and embarrassment surged through his brain. He caught sight of a slender black figure, heard an eager voice. It was she, and here. As he paused she caught sight of him; hesitated, then advanced.

"I'm sure I'm right. You are—I mean I didn't know your name—I could only ask for the gentleman who arrived yesterday, in a motor car, and was staying till tomorrow. I— Oh, *where* can I speak to you for a moment?"

She glanced round at the surprised faces of the porter and a waiter, and the manageress at her official desk. Aubrey murmured something about "drawing-room," and led the way there, fervently hoping the stout lady and her daughters were not its occupants. His anxious glance assured him it was vacant. He offered the girl a chair, but she walked to the window and sat down on a low couch beside it.

"I couldn't meet you," she said abruptly. "At least I'd have been half an hour late. I could hardly expect you to wait so long. Did you go?"

"Yes," he said, conscious of a sudden warmth in his face, and annoyed that he should be conscious. "But—I didn't wait." He said it to save his self-respect, and yet he told himself that she would have been worth waiting for.

"I'm glad," she said, clasping and unclasping her hands in a nervous fashion. "I don't ask what you think of me. Somehow it doesn't seem

to matter. . . . I've heard what I wanted to hear."

He looked the surprise he could not express. No words seemed to fit the situation.

"I forgot all about you," she went on frankly. "And then when I remembered it was too late. I came here, on the chance. I remembered you said 'the Gloucester.'"

Then she rose abruptly. "Well, that's all. I suppose you went to that place today?"

"Yes. I found it very interesting."

"Interesting! You can say *that*! What if anyone you knew, who had been dear to you, and whom you saw helplessly trapped, caught, put away there, out of God's sunlight, out of decent life . . ."

Her voice broke. She turned to the window and looked with fierce unyouthful eyes over the grey waters of the bay. A low ominous growl of thunder broke the stillness, a splash of rain blurred the windows.

Aubrey was conscious of painful embarrassment. Everything about the girl was so strange, so utterly unlike any experience of any other of her sex, that he was inclined to think grief had unhinged her brain. Yet, amidst all his bewilderment, he thought how strange it was that both their minds should be running in the same groove. A personal interest in a criminal offence, and its consequences.

"I'm sorry," he began awkwardly——

She held out an impulsive hand. "Oh! don't mind me. I'm distracted! There's no one who'll speak of it, except in their own prejudiced way. And it was so sudden! So awful! He was like my brother. . . ."

Aubrey started. He looked at the bent head, caught the sweep of fair hair loose over brow and ear. Memory brought back that scene in court. A stern red-faced man; a girl's despairing figure.

"Are you Miss Jessop?"

"Yes." She looked up at him as if questioning how he knew.

"I saw you, in the Court that day—" he went on rapidly, "when the case of——"

"Geoffrey Gale," she said. "Yes, I am his cousin. It was my father who——"

A gesture finished the sentence. Her tear-filled eyes turned again to that outlying fortress, so eloquent of meaning.

"So you were in the Court," she said suddenly. "I wonder if you thought—what everyone else seemed to think?"

"No," said Aubrey firmly. "The one certain thing in my mind was that there had been a mistake. That Geoffrey Gale was innocent."

"Oh, thank you for saying that! It is a comfort. No one pays any attention to me. They think I'm only a child, a schoolgirl ignorant of life. Father is so angry because I won't believe anything against Geoffrey that he sent me away from

home. The subject is not to be discussed, and I *will* discuss it. I can think of nothing else."

"That accounts for last night," said Aubrey.

Then something flashed to his mind. She had called out a name. Was it George Gale she had expected? If so— He was conscious of sudden heart sinking; annoyance, disillusion. Into what an *imbroglio* had that chance visit to the Law Courts led him. There seemed an ironical meaning behind it all.

"Last night? Oh, yes. I was expecting Cousin George. He did not come—until this morning— Well, *that* can't interest you. But it's odd you should have been in the Court that day, stranger that you should share my belief. No one else does."

"Not his brother?" asked Aubrey.

"George? No! He seems very sad, and shocked, but he thinks everything went to prove Geoffrey did it."

"And you think——?"

"I don't *think*," she said. "I know!"

Something in the light and fervour of the young face was more eloquent than any words. Aubrey found himself wondering how it was that a woman's intuition defied a man's logic. Before that splendour of assurance he was dumb. What use to question it?

"You said you were sent here? It is not your home?"

"Oh, no! Manchester is where father lives.

But as I have no mother he has kept me at school. She—she and father couldn't get on. When I was about six years old she ran away; with a Frenchman, I believe. She was French."

Aubrey stared. This was frankness with a vengeance. Had they taught her no better at school than to throw aside all family conventions; its secrets, and disasters?

"French people are different from us," she went on. "We should not judge them on the same grounds. They are not so cold, so strict, so *morale*. I remember my mother. She was lovely, and full of life and gaiety. Perhaps that was it. She could not stand English prudery. And Manchester——"

She made an expressive gesture. "*Si bon morale*, if you like. Anyway that's how it goes. And now I've left school, and am going to be married."

Aubrey was dumb.

"It's not my wish," she went on rapidly. "But father has arranged it. He says after this—scandal, no one will want to know us. To me, that seems little loss, as applied to Manchester. Here, it makes no difference. Madame Gascoigne has been like a mother to me always. She thinks no worse of us for the misfortune. But they all want this marriage. They think it so suitable; so I've agreed."

"Agreed? Don't you feel it's *you* who are being sacrificed to conventions!" exclaimed Aubrey.

She shrugged her shoulders. He knew now from where she got her pretty trick of gesture; her frank odd speech.

"What matter! A girl must marry—someone. George is kind and good, and he loves me. It will amuse me to be a *curé's* wife. I love the country; the peace, the quaint people, the old churches and villages. Oh, yes! I have no fault to find with my *rôle*. Geoffrey was my dear brother. In three months' time I shall be his sister—really."

Aubrey Derringham could find nothing to say. This girl seemed capable of reducing his brain to pulp, and his usual ease of speech to silence. Yet there was something in her very outspokenness that he could not rebuke.

He continued looking at her, wondering why they had met? Why a mere whim, born of idle curiosity, had had such curious results? For here he was, confronted with another actor in the drama, by an incident as palpably careless as the lighting of a cigarette. If he had not strolled quite so far, if a girl's grief had not touched his heart, if a handclasp had not meant—something—that no other handclasp had ever meant?

If—? But what use to sum up more trivialities? He had reached a blind alley. He would go no further. For two years Geoffrey Gale was shut away from friend, or help of friendship. And this girl was to be his brother's wife.

CHAPTER VII

"WHEN LOVE AND LIFE ARE FAIR"

"THE rain is over," she said suddenly. "I must go." Aubrey started. His thoughts had led him to and fro in a maze of speculation. He woke to reality with the sense of the day's importance.

"Oh, please, not yet!" he exclaimed. "I mean I haven't said half of what I wished to say. Last night——"

"Ah, last night!" she interrupted him in her impetuous fashion. "It was strange, was it not? We seemed friends not strangers. Today it is different. I—feel you don't like me—so much."

"Don't like you?" he faltered. "What makes you say that?"

"Oh, it is how I *feel*. I can't explain. One knows some things by instinct. Of course it must seem strange to you that I should have spoken, or acted, as I did. This morning I felt angry with myself. I did not tell Madame Gascoigne—or George," she added.

Aubrey laughed; a short mirthless laugh. "Perhaps it was as well," he said.

"You have nothing to say to me today," she went on. "You too feel everything is different."

"You—are different," he said impulsively.

"I? Oh, no! I am always the same. What I feel, what I think, *that* I say. It is not *convenable*, I suppose. Madame has always rebuked me. But there—" She shrugged her shoulders again. "As one is, one is. That is me. And now—" She turned swiftly to him. "I suppose it is adieu. I wonder if we shall ever meet again?"

"Hardly possible," he said stiffly.

"Ah, one never knows! Perhaps some day you will be driving your motor car over the moors of Devon, even as you drove it over those great downs yonder. Perhaps it will stop at a little village, with an old church, and queer little thatched houses, and you will look around and say: 'How charming, how idyllic!' And then Monsieur le Curé will invite you to see his church, and Madame le Curé will ask you to step into her ivy-covered *presbytère* and have a cup of tea, and lo! it is I, whom you meet again. It is in books, is it not?"

"Yes," he said. "But life isn't exactly like books."

"Life is horrid I think. That's why I shall go away, right out of it, with only nature and my little parish to concern me—until Geoffrey is free."

"Is his brother very much grieved at his sentence?" asked Aubrey.

"George? Yes, of course. *Désolé*, troubled as

never before. And he is not strong, poor boy. He has what you call heart-affection, *maladie de cœur*. Partly for that I am going to marry him. He would suffer if I refused. I should not like him to suffer."

"You are a most—extraordinary young lady!" exclaimed Aubrey.

"Am I?" She looked quietly at him. "Other people say so too. I suppose I must be. It is the French side of me, I expect."

She held out her hand. "I must go now. I have taken up your time. It must be near *table d'hôte*. Do you go tomorrow? I should love to have seen your motor car!"

"Would you! Well, why not?" exclaimed Aubrey eagerly. "I'll take you for a run in it, if you like?"

"You would! You would! *Ciel!* But I should love that!" Excitement seized her. "Let us go then, tonight, when the moon rises! Oh! I have so longed for a motor drive in the moonlight! Over those downs, away into the green heart of the country!"

She clasped her hands. Her eyes, darkly blue as violets are, looked entreaty to his own. Of convention, propriety, she never seemed to think. Aubrey asked himself why should he?

"Tonight?" He went to the window and looked out. "Yes, if you wish. The sky is clearing. I think by eight o'clock it will be quite fine."

"Eight o'clock? It is a hundred hours!" she cried enthusiastically. "But I will be ready. I will come. Oh! how can I thank you! Never had I believed such a pleasure would be mine!"

Aubrey smiled. "Am I to call at your house? What about the *fiancé*?"

"George? Oh, he is gone! He left by train, this afternoon. And Madame Gascoigne, she will not forbid it. I do as I please in that *ménage*. She adores me. When you see her, you will adore her."

"Am I to see her? What if she refuses?"

"Why should she? I will tell her it is my wish. That is enough. She knows I am in grief. She hates me to cry. Anything that will please me for a little moment is enough for her. Besides——"

She paused and took a thoughtful survey of the young man. "You are *si vrai gentilhomme*," she said softly.

He coloured to the roots of his hair. Her voice sounded like a strain of exquisite music. The look in her eyes set his pulses beating to an unknown rhythm. Never had he felt quite such a fool, or quite so happy.

The girl had gone leaving the impression of her bewildering memory to the exclusion of all else.

Aubrey Derringham did not dress for dinner. It seemed hardly worth while when in half an hour he would have to get out his car and don leather coat and cap. He wondered if the girl had a thick

wrap, or a motor veil? Would a shop be open where he could buy one? He rang for a chambermaid and questioned her. She proffered assistance, and he gave her half a sovereign for the purchase. When he came up from dinner, a parcel lay on his dressing-table, which proved itself a long filmy grey veil of approved design. Rugs he had in plenty, and it was with a thrill of previously unknown excitement that he sought his car, and gave it personal test and examination.

The sky had cleared. The air was soft and exhilarating. The Mercedes was in perfect condition and purred contentedly beneath his skilled touch. The clock tower on the Promenade was pointing to eight as he glided past. Sixty seconds brought him to the house the girl had indicated. He pressed the hooter. The door was opened immediately. She stood there dressed in a long woollen jersey and a cap to match. Beside her was a white-haired, frail-looking old lady. She came out to the car to be introduced as Madame Gascoigne.

The girl clambered in to the seat beside him with a joyous greeting.

"You will have care, monsieur?" pleaded the old lady. "The child, she is wilful, and one refuses her nothing, but she is dear to my heart."

"I will take every care of her," promised Aubrey, wondering if he had strolled into Arcadia, a place of simple trust, and frank speech, and unconventional actions.

He gave the girl the motor veil, and showed her how to adjust it over her cap. "It is cold, even on a warm night, in an open car," he said.

"Ah—that you should think of *that!*" she cried ecstatically. She wound the soft folds about her head and throat, looking lovelier than ever in their shrouding mysteries. Then with a murmured farewell, a wave of her hand, they were off, gliding along the sea road, and so up to the great rolling downs. The dusky evening shadows closed around as they sped up and onwards. The girl sat quite still save for occasional little soft cries of ecstasy.

It astonished Aubrey that anything so familiar to himself could be pure unmixed delight to another person. He showed off the powers of the car with a novel sense of pride. Its magnificent hill flights; its perfect obedience to clutch and accelerator, its swift yet perfectly controlled speed. Over the white roads they glided, as mysteriously and easily as only a perfect car can travel. The world seemed their own. The moon rose clear and bright in a cloudless sky. The air rushed by like wings of living creatures, eloquent with the meaning of speed and freedom. Everything around was charged with an electric force of sensation, excited by novelty. The current of life was flowing to a fuller tide. Just to *be*, and to breathe, and to feel, made up a sense of enjoyment new to both.

Yet even a perfect car is subject to the hazard of accident. Quite suddenly the still air was rent by an explosive sound; the car swerved slightly

to the left, then obeyed the peremptory check of its driver. The girl had uttered a startled cry, but she sat perfectly still though it seemed as if a cannon had been fired behind her. The car stopped suddenly.

"What is it?" she cried.

"Only a tyre gone. I was afraid of this road. It's been newly stoned."

"Oh! can't we go on any more?" she cried plaintively.

Aubrey laughed. "Why, of course. I'll put it right in ten minutes."

He was on the ground and taking off his motor coat and rolling up his sleeves before she had quite realized what he was about to do. Then she flung aside her rugs and got out also.

"Do you mean to say you can *mend* it, set it going again? But how wonderful!" she exclaimed.

"It wouldn't be much good my driving a car if I didn't know how to supplement a burst tyre, or mend a puncture!" said Aubrey. "I have a very clever chauffeur, and he's taught me as much about motor mechanism as would serve a mechanic seeking employment. You see this wheel? Well, I'm going to put it on, alongside of the other. It's called a Stepney. Praised be the inventor!"

He had got out the "jack," and she watched him with absorbed interest, as he gradually raised the useless wheel, and then fitted the Stepney to it.

"How clever you are!" she murmured ad-

miringly. "I didn't think you could do anything of that sort. Your hands——"

"Perhaps they're not as useless as they look."

"I wouldn't say they looked—useless. Only the sort of hands that had never done any sort of work, like that."

"If you had been where I was yesterday, you'd have seen hands as delicate doing harder work than adjusting a tyre," he said.

"Ah!"—it was a sharp little sound. He looked up to where she was standing, her loosened veil floating over her shoulders.

"Are there men—like you in that horrible place? You—you did not tell me."

"You never asked. Besides, what use to talk of them, or the place? They have all brought themselves under the penalty of broken laws."

"Did you see them in the quarries, working?"

"Yes."

"Are they guarded, chained, watched, as one hears?"

"Some, the desperate characters, had leg chains; not all."

"Do you know," she said suddenly, "what I was thinking when we were flying, flying, along across the downs, over the roads?"

"How can I guess your thoughts?"

"I was thinking if I saw one of those poor prisoners how I would help him escape. How I would snatch him up in this swift wonderful machine, and carry him away, away, where no

one could find him, no cruel law touch him. And as I thought I seemed to see—Geoffrey.”

Aubrey rose, and began to unscrew the “jack” again.

“It wouldn’t be possible, my child,” he said gently, “to help—Geoffrey, or any one in such a way. Every car has a number. It could be traced as easily as—as the prisoner it sought to aid. Besides, there is a penalty for such aid.”

“I wouldn’t care for that!”

“You wouldn’t like to be deprived of your liberty also?”

“Is that what is done to one for showing a little mercy?”

“The Law doesn’t choose that anyone should supply what it denies.”

“The Law! Ah, I remember those hard men, that stern old Judge, the dull, heavy, unfeeling jury! That was the Law, and what it said *has* to be, has it not?”

“Yes. A sentence passed is fixed and unchangeable. Very, very rarely has it been altered.”

“Not if they found out *afterwards* that the man they had condemned was innocent?”

Aubrey put away his tools, and took up his motor coat. “I have never heard of such a case,” he said.

“But it’s not impossible; it might happen?”

“My dear young lady, anything *might* happen, so long as the sky’s above and the earth beneath us. Now, the car is ready again, if you will enter.”

"For how long will you drive me?" she asked, as she re-tied her veil.

"That depends on where you want to go. At present we are on the way to Wareham, I believe. The last milestone said so."

"Wareham? It is a market town. I have been there, by train."

"Well, shall we turn off somewhere else? Only I prefer the main road, at night, as the country is strange to me."

"It is strange to me, like this," she said. "Oh! let us go just on. It doesn't matter."

"It would matter if we went on—say to London," said Aubrey. "I fancy Madame Gascoigne would hardly approve. You are a very self-willed young person, but even you can't contemplate a whole night's run in a motor car, with a comparative stranger."

"Now, you are horrid!" she said. "And talking like the prim old people in Manchester talk. How I hate Manchester—after *this*!" Her hand swept out with a gesture embracing the country round. "But I hate all towns! Don't you?"

"Not all," he said. "I happen to live in London. I am very fond of it."

"Fond! Fond of London? That dark, dismal, horrible place. All fogs and grey skies, and dark streets. And the noise—oh! the terrible noise!"

"You mustn't judge it by the Law Courts side. Where did you stay?"

"Somewhere in the Strand, isn't it called?"

"And is that all you saw of England's capital?"

"It was enough for me. Never do I want to see it again. Those great dark buildings, those narrow noisy streets! And the sad, harassed faces. I never saw one smile, I never saw one happy. Oh! I was glad to come away!"

"Did you come here, at once, or go back with your father?" asked Aubrey.

"I went back, but I became ill. I suffered—ah, no one knew how I suffered! And the doctor said Manchester did not agree with me, so my father sent me back to Madame. She was glad to have me. She loves me as her own child. She has retired now, and given up the school, but her home, it is always mine, so she says."

"Why do you want to leave it, then?" enquired Aubrey. "If you are happy there, and it is a home, why are you going to be—married?"

He hesitated over the word. It seemed absurd to picture this prattling innocent child a wife. She looked scarcely sixteen, despite her tall height.

"Why? But I told you. It is arranged for me. And George has his curacy, and he has loved me—always. You see—it has to be."

Aubrey did not see it at all. He thought there was no absolute necessity for the arrangement, or for her meek yielding to it. She was so young, and her eyes were only a child's eyes; trusting and innocent. He asked her how old she was, and she told him quite frankly. "Seventeen. But

in three months I shall be eighteen. Then, they wish the marriage to take place."

"You say your cousin loves you," said Aubrey.

"But what about yourself? Do you——"

"Do I love *him*?" she put in quickly. "Have I not said we are as sister and brothers. He, and Geoffrey, and I. Of course I love him. Not as I do Madame Gascoigne, but that is, of course, different. I know George, I have always been used to see him at home. My father loves him as a son. Oh—it is quite well arranged, I assure you."

Aubrey Derringham felt again that odd sense of hopelessness. This girl affected him so strangely. There was such fascination about her youth and simplicity; about that clear unfaltering gaze, and that quaint outlook on life. He seemed to see her in that Manchester house, rebelling at convention, yet playing daughter and sister effectively enough. And then had come this shock, and life had turned to vital vivid drama. She had been a passive spectator of the opening scenes. Had learnt what suffering and suspense could mean. And now——

"You are going very slow," said the voice beside him. "Are you tired of holding that wheel?"

"Tired? No, of course not. I was thinking we ought to be turning back. We must have been out an hour. It will take another to reach the town."

"Only an hour! Oh—I should like to stay out all the night, and see the stars fade, and the dawn come, and yet be flying on and on, as if time didn't exist!"

"Has no one ever told you that there are things one must not do, although they are perfectly harmless in themselves?" asked Aubrey.

"If they have told me I didn't pay any attention. Some things in my life are unusual I know, and my father thinks I have had too much of my own way. But what of that? I've never done anything I'm ashamed of. Have you?"

"That's hardly a fair question. The same rules don't regulate a man's life and a woman's."

"Why not?"

"Because they're different. The one goes forth into the world to battle with life and learn its lessons—bitter ones—sometimes. And the other, she is sheltered and protected, and kept from harsh, unlovely things so that her nature may be pure and lovely, as herself."

"That is all very absurd, you know," said the girl. "Men are good and bad, and so are women. That much I know, but the badness seems ever so much more fascinating than the goodness. My mother—I suppose you would call her bad? My father did, and does, and he—oh, *he* is all that is good, and honourable, and uninteresting. Yet I don't love his reality as dearly as I love her memory!"

"You are so young," said Aubrey feebly.

"Not too young to think and feel. Besides, I've read so much, I'm not ignorant."

Her face took on a strange dignity, as he turned his bewildered eyes to it.

"I must say you are the most surprising specimen of your sex I have ever met!" he exclaimed.

"Have you met many?"

"A few hundred, or so."

"And have you ever been in love with any of them?"

Aubrey laughed. "'Pon my word I don't believe I have. They all bore me, or disgust me, after a time."

"Which do I do?"

"You?"

"Yes. Do I bore you, or the other thing? It didn't sound—nice. Tell the truth now!"

"I hardly know," said Aubrey. "If I think of how you have impressed me it represents a series of shocks, more or less startling. You look such a child, and yet——"

"*Do* go on! I've never heard myself described before."

"And yet, last night, you seemed a woman in your grief, and loneliness."

"Last night seems a long way off," she said. "I don't think it's *in* me to feel very deeply, or very long. Something comes to me, or *tears* at me, and then—it's all over, and I forget. I think I must be like my mother, only I hope I shan't fall in love with someone after I've married George. It would distress him I'm afraid. And a clergyman's wife must be of good behaviour."

"Powers above!" muttered Aubrey. "Did ever any man hear the like!"

VIII

"A HIDING-PLACE FOR FEAR"

UNTHINKING Aubrey Derringham had taken the road to Wareham. They passed Wool, and crossed the railway line. To the right lay desolate moorland ascending to the cliff heights of Durdle Bay, and St. Aldhelm's Head. The moon escaping a bank of clouds shone full and clear over the wide expanse.

"We shall see Corfe!" exclaimed the girl. "Oh, go on, please go on! There is a gap in the hills, and we shall see the Castle! You know it, do you not? That old, old ruin of Saxon times. It looks so strange, and the village is so ancient."

"Corfe Castle? No, I have never seen it."

The sound was reminiscent of school days, and of English history reduced to digestive tabloids for the youthful mind. Obedient to her whim he took the road which mounted sharply upwards. Then he checked the car, and for once shared the youthful enthusiasm of enjoying "a view."

For suddenly the old ruin had shown itself. Great walls agape, and keep and tower and bastion dimly suggested by an outline. Rugged and

defiant it stood on its lonely hilltop; with sightless windows gazing like blind eyes on desolation. A strange record of man's strength, and man's treachery.

"Beautiful—is it not?" murmured the girl. "Oh! I'm glad to see it again, like this. The first time it was daylight, a school picnic. They spoilt it for me. It was nothing to them. That wonderful old castle, so old, so old, so old! One's mind can't believe it! They only laughed, and ran races down the slope. Myself—I planned it all; the moat, the keep, the drawbridge. It is there, between those two towers. How near it seems, does it not? And yet there are miles between us."

"And a bad road. I fancy. Besides——"

He looked at his motor clock. The hands on the dial pointed to half-past nine. She followed his glance.

"I suppose we must return? I am sorry." She suddenly clasped her hands. "Oh—when one is happy, when one enjoys, why must it always end!"

"You have enjoyed this evening?" he questioned.

"More than anything in my life!" she exclaimed. "It goes to mark one of its—sensations. I mean one of the things one really *feels*, and that one knows one will never regret."

An odd little thrill, a sudden inability to say anything quite in keeping with such frank simplicity stirred Aubrey Derringham's heart. To

anyone less frank and innocent it would have been easy to affect recognition of a compliment. But he could not play man of the world tonight. He too felt that there were times in life when the simple things were the best; when one turned involuntarily to nature as friend instead of foe.

He said nothing therefore, and the girl did not seem to remark his silence. Her eyes, dark and glowing in the soft light, were gazing to where the old castle towered in lonely glory. A landmark of time and its changes. Her mind was absorbed in some dreams of those far-off days. Kings and queens and belted knights, and royal vicissitudes. Stirring times when a man's foot was in the stirrup, and the sword was in his hand, and life for those who lived it was hazardous and therefore sweet.

At last she drew a deep breath and turned to him. "That's over," she said. "Let us go home."

His engine had stopped. He got out and set it going. Then backed the car till turning was possible, and ran at full speed over the moorland road and retraced the route to Weymouth. Not a word was spoken between them. From time to time he glanced at her absorbed face, as she sat with hands clasped on the Jaeger rug, and eyes staring straight ahead at swiftly passed turns and twists and signposts. Only a browsing horse, or a stray dog, relieved the picture of still life. The cottage windows were dark; the road deserted. It seemed to the girl as if she and her companion

and the throbbing swift car that carried them through the night were the only things in the world. All else was dead, or dumb, or asleep. Never had she felt so vividly alive. So conscious of something new and wonderful close at hand, yet not to be translated into words. That rush through the air; the accident; the queer disjointed talk, and then that long quiet meditation on the side of the desolate moor, in sight of that desolate ruin, what a picture they made. Something to be set aside, and treasured by reason of its strangeness. Framed in beauty and unspoken mystery.

Then she thought how soon it would be all over. He would plunge back into the great swirling torrent of life as London and society must mean it, and for her there remained only its insignificant backwaters. He had been so nice to her too, treated her, not as a foolish schoolgirl, but as she had always wanted to be treated. No one believed she had outgrown childish ideas, but she knew she had. She had known it since that fateful day when her favourite cousin had turned that agonized look on her from the prisoner's dock. She knew it now as her heart grew sick and cold with every mile that measured a parting.

Only a few hours ago she had looked upon life as a thing settled and ruled for her by wiser heads. She had been willing to accept what they had decreed; had looked for content, if not for happiness. But now—a restless dissatisfied spirit was at war within her heart, arguing, suggesting. She

shook herself impatiently, and Aubrey asked if she was cold? His voice recalled her to the immediate present.

"Cold? Oh no! I was only wondering if I'd ever see you again."

"You suggested it, did you not, when Madame le Curé was to offer me the hospitality of her parish rectory?"

"Ah—*that!* It was just foolish nonsense. I didn't know you, I mean. I don't think I should like to see you in my house when I am Madame le Curé."

"Indeed?" he said coldly. "I regret I have left so bad an impression."

"*Bad!*" She turned impulsively. "Bad—impression, did you say? *Mon Dieu!* How stupidly I must have expressed myself! No, you are wrong; quite wrong! It would not please me that we met under my husband's roof. I might compare him with you. Do you see?"

"What then?" asked Aubrey, half inclined to laugh, and yet uncertain of the wisdom of mirth at a crucial moment.

"What then? Ah! that I can't say now. I have to find out whether he makes me *content*, as one says."

He noted she did not say "happy." Did she really expect nothing more of wedded love and life than just—content? It added another link to the puzzle she had become to him. All his knowledge of the world, his experiences, convic-

tions, instincts, left him only baffled and perplexed before this extraordinary girl, who had whirled him from surprise to surprise, emotion to emotion, only to disconcert him more than ever by an admission too flattering to accept. A vain coxcomb might have accepted it, and traded on its naïve betrayal, but Aubrey Derringham was essentially what the girl had frankly characterized—*vrai gentilhomme*.

“Ah, the lights again! It is over!”

The girl turned impulsively as she spoke. One hand touched the arm of her companion. “It was good, that long silence, was it not? Only two who understand can be together in thought.”

Aubrey slackened speed, and looked at the beautiful young face, so strangely, unyouthfully grave.

“You don’t even know my name,” he said, “nor I yours.”

“Yet we have known each other since last night, have we not? That proves what I said. One finds a friend by instinct, not by any sort of introduction.”

“Yes, that must be so,” he said.

The car swept round the curve of the road. The bay lay to their left, a sheet of molten silver pierced here and there by a golden trail of light from the moored vessels, or the waiting yachts.

“It has been beautiful, this night, this drive, everything,” she said softly. “And now it is

adieu. You go back to London tomorrow, do you not?"

Something within him tempted him to say he was master of his own actions. He need not go back on the morrow unless he desired, but quickly following that thought came one more prudent. What use to continue this acquaintanceship, to learn more of this quaintly fascinating child than three meetings had shown him?

Mystery is alluring, but it is also dangerous. A character such as had unfolded itself in so surprising a fashion was interesting beyond doubt, but he was man enough to realize that though what one admires may be forgotten, what interests one is apt to disturb. And he did not care to be disturbed, by a girl, at thirty years of age!

"Are you never going to answer? I asked if you go back tomorrow?"

"Yes," he said abruptly. And then felt angry at having signed his own warrant of banishment.

"So it must be adieu. I don't suppose we shall ever meet—again."

"You may come here sometimes?" he suggested.

"I wonder? . . . I think not. Everything will be different. I knew this place as a child, as a girl. Somehow I don't want to come back when *that* is all changed."

He slowed down more and more, trying to lengthen the few remaining yards of distance.

"And what about your name? Am I to know it?"

"My name? Ah, I forgot! I have two. One, my mother gave me, and I love it, and Madame calls me it. It is Renée."

"It suits you," he said softly. "It is a charming name."

"It is not altogether a girl's name," she went on. "But I was supposed to be a boy. Mother used to pretend. Sometimes I was the little son she had so desired. Perhaps had I been so, she would not have left me?"

Aubrey was conscious of sudden hot indignation. That a mother, *her* mother, could have behaved so atrociously! It was unpardonable.

"The other name, my father's name, is Mary," she went on. "I don't like it, though it is the name of Christ's own mother. It doesn't suit me. I am not good, I am not a saint. *Ma foi! Non!* And yet I suppose I must alter all that when I marry George Gale."

The car stopped. They were at the house, and he was gently unfolding the soft folds of the Jaeger rug.

"It's no use to thank you!" she said abruptly. "But I'm sure you know what it has been. Now, adieu—*mon ami*."

"You don't ask my name?" he said, as he took off his thick driving glove, and accepted the frankly extended hand.

"No. I am not curious. I can remember you as you are without any silly labels."

He released the slender hand.

"I hope," he said, "your life will be happy. And that this first—trouble, may be its last."

"That sounds very nice. But you can't really believe that trouble stops short at one dose, even a big one like this? I expect plenty more. It is life, I know. What is it Balzac says? 'One must paint life in tints of Fate.' And he knew something of the human heart, did he not?"

"You have read Balzac?"

"But, of course! Why not? Madame has him beautifully bound, all his wonderful volumes. I read them in the last holidays. *Cousine Bette*, and the *Peau de Chagrin*, and *Eugénie Grandet*, and *Cousin Pons*. Poor, old, lonely man! Ah! *that* is sad, if you like. To be old, and lonely, and unloved. You had better find yourself a wife, monsieur, or that may be your fate."

She turned the handle of the door and it opened suddenly. Aubrey caught sight of her, a slender figure standing under the dim gaslight of a narrow hall; a loose wave of hair blown from under her cap, falling over one flushed cheek.

Then she waved her hand, and closed the door. He drove back to the hotel.

To think that he had once been bored with life! Had declared it a succession of monotonous days without one real interest!

Chaffey was feeling a little perplexed.

The master whom he served so faithfully, loved so devotedly, had come back to town a day later

than arranged. More than that, he had come back altered in some subtle and indescribable way. He was no longer bored, listless, indifferent. On the contrary, a curious restlessness had evinced itself, demanding active outlet.

He sought distraction in a confused and hurried fashion quite unlike his former lazy indifference. He went out a great deal, returned home at unseemly hours; would accept half a dozen engagements for one evening and endeavour to keep them. The season was setting the pace at a reckless expenditure of time, and money, and human energy. Aubrey Derringham tried to keep up with it. No more dreaming hours of study and solitude. Scarcely even time for those friendly semi-humorous confabs beloved of the faithful valet. Above all, no return of interest in that case which had, so it seemed, set the spark to hitherto unkindled energies. That subject was closed, so it seemed. Chaffey had spoken of his visit to Manchester, and his master had listened. But after hearing the bald facts of old Jessop's return to a blameless life, of the departure of the favoured nephew to his first "cure of souls," of the absence of the "young lady," who was to be the partner and sharer in such laudable enterprise, he had never returned to the subject. Chaffey knew his place better than to force it upon him. He ended his information by the remark that prisoners, on good-conduct terms, might receive a visit from friends once in three months.

Aubrey had looked up quietly. "Is that so? How does one arrange it?"

Chaffey gave the details of request, formalities, and permission. Then the subject dropped. He did not suspect that his master had made a mental register of the facts; that at a later time he discussed the matter with Joshua Myers, the prisoner's counsel; that there had sprung up in his mind a longing to pay at least one visit to that place of incarceration where Geoffrey Gale was detained.

Meantime the season was hurrying on through that *mêlée* of operas, dances, picture shows, royal garden parties, races, river pageants, which culminate in Goodwood and expire with Cowes. He seemed to be everywhere and at everything worth being at. His friends chaffed him for his unusual energy. Society mothers regarded him with hopeful eyes. Derringham was really good-looking, and interesting when he liked; not half so cynical or ill-natured as his reputation. So time sped on, and only when he indulged in some long lonely "spin" did Aubrey ever let himself think of that oddly fascinating child, who had once been his companion. He wondered if she was still content to leave her fate in other hands? The thought of her youth, her absolute unlikeness to the pretty frivolous dolls he daily met, and danced and talked with, kept her memory a thing apart, and in some way sacred. Innocence is one of the most puzzling and beautiful attributes of feminine youth. He never lost that impression of Renée Jessop's

innocence. Yet he told himself he did not wish to see her again. She had had a curiously disturbing effect, and any pretence of friendship between a man of his experience and a girl of her charm and loveliness would be impossible. It could lead only to disaster, and he felt no desire to seek trouble or to cause it. So it was that he threw himself into the frivolous stream of life, and thrust disturbing memories aside by the reminder that she might be married by now. In any case, her life and his must lie apart—henceforward.

He was running up the steep hill to Hindhead. It was a Saturday night, and he had suddenly resolved to spend Sunday in that lovely district. As he reached the heights above the wonderful "dip" he paused, and looked round. It was a perfect evening, warm and still; the scents of pine and heather filled the air. After the closeness of London the change was delicious. He felt glad he had come. But as he paused and drank in the serene beauty of air and scene it occurred to him that he was very lonely. His pleasures, such as these were, seemed always solitary pleasures. It was rare to find a soul in unison, a mind attuned to his own tastes or feelings. He looked at the vacant seat beside him and knew that among all the crowds of men and women with whom his life and the past three months were associated, there was not one whom he would have cared to see in that vacant seat. It was odd, very odd. But he

ran through the catalogue, and again came to that conclusion. He drew out his case, and lit a cigarette, sitting there by his steering wheel, and gazing with sudden discontent at the roseate glow of the sky, and the grey shadows gathering in the great hollowed bowl at his feet.

"How *she* would love this," he thought, and seemed to see again a vivid face, and deep soft eyes, and hair that fell across the oval outline of a young cheek.

What was there about this girl that set her apart and aloof in his memory? That brought the sound of her voice; its rapid utterance, its quick flights and fancies so close to his inner senses that to think was to hear? Nothing in those past weeks had deadened that vivid sense of her. He could put it aside for a time, but in moments like these it rushed back like a tumultuous force. He felt he wanted to know if her resolution held good, and yet he had not the courage to seek her. Besides, it was no business of his whom she married.

He flung the cigarette away, and set the car in motion. He had wired for a room at the hotel, and it was already dusk. "I wish I could forget her!" he muttered savagely. "She seems to have a trick of intruding on my solitude, and I hate it!"

But did he hate it—really? Would he rather have never met that disturbing personality than know that his solitude was shared by her? It was a difficult question to answer. And the answer was not given then, or in the manner he expected.

CHAPTER IX

“TO HELP A BROTHER’S SOUL”

WHEN romance first flashes across a hitherto colourless life it is apt to be disturbing. It makes no direct appeal to heart and senses as passion can and does make; rather it represents warmth and colour hitherto lacking. It is as the subtle fragrance of unseen flowers; a silent appeal to the latent chivalry in man, or the softer susceptibilities of woman. It sends him to nature, and her to poetry; exacerbating and yet fulfilling life. The “light that never was on land or sea” gives hints of remoter glory. Absence and silence become pleaders for a cause, and yet there has been no need of its presentation.

To Aubrey Derringham these “off Sundays,” when he escaped the madding crowd and the pressure of engagements, were as fragments of solitude broken off from the great fabric of social insincerities. Removed from their influence he indulged in lonely rambles, queer unreasonable thoughts, odd fancies of life as it never had been, and never could be—for him.

But when he woke on that Sunday morning at

Hindhead, he suddenly recognized that peace of mind was not his for the seeking. Somehow it had vanished, leaving only a riotous disorganization of thoughts and desires behind it. And in that moment he faced the greatest thing in life, and knew he must "have it out" with himself, in so facing it.

Without the motive power of love the human machine is only a machine running without method. Aubrey Derringham had not exactly scoffed at love as a weakness, he had ignored it as a force. It had seemed perfectly easy to amuse oneself with a woman and then—forget her. The world was so full of women, and they were all so much alike considered as a sex. He had reached the safe vantage point of thirty years without a serious entanglement, or a disturbing influence. And then in a moment a girl's face, a girl's odd reckless confessions, had flashed across his mind's content and lo!—there was content no longer!

It was humiliating; it was puzzling; but he had to face it as a truth. To learn that however strong a man may be individually, a stronger than he may force a confession of weakness, and though disarming him with one hand, glorify him with the other.

He had spent the morning strolling, lounging, lazing in shady hollows, with the aromatic breath of heather and pine in his nostrils; the deep cloudless sky above the inky blackness of the woods. And in all those hours he was fighting a desire to

see this girl once more. To see her while she was still—a girl. Before that man, whom he had seen only once, but never forgotten, should have set the seal and right of possession on her careless irresponsible youth.

He fought the idea in these solitudes as he had fought it in crowds, and streets, amidst the babel and confusion of fashionable life. And hard as was the fight, the longing triumphed.

He spent an hour consulting maps and routes, arguing that there was no need to go back to town; that these long clear nights were made for motor runs, and country solitudes. One could select one's route, and go on and on to—Land's End, if one desired. Five hundred miles, or thereabouts. A fascinating run. He looked at the long list of stopping places; at the bordering counties. Surrey, Wilts, Hants, Dorset—Dorset? Well, why not?

A curious tingling warmth came to his cheeks, as he asked himself that question; his eyes still on Route No. I., and its connecting links with No.'s XIV. and XV.

Abruptly he closed the book, and went back to the hotel for luncheon. He read and dozed the hot afternoon hours away. At four o'clock he ordered some tea, and directed that his bag should be brought down. Then he paid his bill and took out his Mercedes, and with an exhilarating sense, as of truancy from rigid discipline, he sped off and

away through the bordering lanes, and across the wide highroads towards Winchester.

So do men cheat themselves, all "*pour le bon motif*." So does Fate weave her webs, and set her snares, smiling at the subterfuge which alike entangles or entraps her victims.

Aubrey Derringham had never driven quite so recklessly as on that July night. But then he had never driven to such a fury of stirring pulse and mutinous heart-throbs.

The miles chased each other on the dial of his speedometer; the cool air fanned his brow; the dust clouds swirled and eddied before his eyes, and passed into confused density behind the big automobile. And with every mile and every ascent and every recurring landmark, his spirits rose, and he could have sung aloud for sheer joy of a long-denied freedom.

He stopped twice. Once for some needed refreshment; again for petrol.

Then in the cool delicious night he caught sight at last of those remembered heights of Purbeck, and it seemed to his foolish fancy that the car recognized them also; so softly it glided, so sweetly it purred. "Perhaps she will be with us again," it seemed to say, and Aubrey wondered how owners of perfectly disciplined cars could ever be ignorant of their intelligence.

Across those undulating downs he swept. At

last before him lay the sheeted silver of the bay, shot with enlacing threads of gold from vessels and harbour and lighthouse. How familiar it looked. His heart grew reminiscent as he rounded the curve of Preston, and ran rapidly along by the shining pebble ridge. There, before him, lay the cluster of houses. One of them *her* dwelling place. Marvel that it should be just commonplace brick and stone, set amidst a dozen others as commonplace.

He passed it slowly, the faint hoot of his horn sounding a signal. It was all in darkness. He remembered that her window was on the other side overlooking the bay. Of course she would not hear signals, or associate them with his automobile if she did. The car rolled on, and he stopped it again at the Gloucester. He was dusty, and tired, and very hungry. A sleepy waiter offered the usual hotel fare.

"Cold roast beef, chicken, ham, tongue."

Aubrey ordered beef and salad, and a bottle of Bass, and felt a new man before his meal was over. It was twelve o'clock when he went up to his room, and threw the window wide to the sea and the night, and the quiet stars.

Life seemed good to him at that moment. Peace settled on his soul. He forgot that ominous monster crouched in stony defiance beyond the breakwater. He only smoked and dreamed in the placid moonlight, while the gentle murmur of the sea came ever and anon to his ears.

"Tomorrow," it seemed to say, and a sense of joy and expectance surged to his brain, as he listened. "Tomorrow?" . . . and that was here—almost. A few hours' sleep, a dream or two, and then the day.

It seemed now that he had foolishly sacrificed other days, other hours. That he might have stayed in his Arcadia instead of flying to other distractions just to put out of his head what never could be put out of it. His eyes took in the beauty of sea and sky and space; the beauty over which his eyes had so often rested. A sense of comradeship returned. She had said once that she could trust him; she must never unsay it. He would see her just once more, take the cool flower-like hand in his own, wish her Godspeed in her new life, and then—well, then he must cease to dream, and learn to live.

There was something to do in that great world beyond. Some fellow-soul to help, some saner, cleaner mode of life than the *flâneurs* and wasters of cities believed in. He would go abroad again. To Africa and its wilds, or Asia and its mysteries. Away from this endless round of pretended pleasures, the vapid frothy extravagance of a corrupt civilization. He would take Chaffey with him, and seek adventure on new lines. Give up these idle dreams; these indolent comforts. Follow in the footsteps of pioneers of new industries; new lands brought new interests. He would—well, there was everything apparently that he would

do, and only one thing he would *not*: set forth on any such enterprise without one more sight of Renée Jessop's face; one more clasp of Renée Jessop's hand.

Renée—the name was on his lips, softly breathed as a prayer or blessing. She was his last thought as sleep overtook him, and he passed with a single stride out of a soiled and difficult world to the Kingdom of Rest.

“It is *you*! Really you!”

She was standing by the open window when he had first seen her. He was holding her hands, both of them. Her face was like a rose in its fresh young beauty, her eyes—he thought of violets with the dew of morning in their hearts. And all about her waved the splendour of her hair, sun-dried after her morning swim.

He had waited for her return, and Madame Gascoigne had entertained him. He had seen her cross the lawn, and come swiftly up to the house. Had heard her soft cry of amazement, and then found himself holding her hands, and stammering something about a “motor tour,” embracing this special coast *en route* for the Land's End.

“How perfectly lovely!” she cried rapturously. “All by yourself!” she added. “I call that selfish!”

A sudden idea flashed across Aubrey Derringham's mind. If she and Madame Gascoigne would like a motor run, he would be only too happy to take them.

Renée gave a little cry of delight. "Oh, Madame! did you ever *hear* such a perfectly entrancing suggestion! A *tour*, a thing of *days*—not hours, and in that exquisite car, that rolls on velvet, and flies the hills like a bird! Oh! I've *lived* that night over and over again! But I never thought you would remember me! I suppose it was only because this was on your route of the tour?"

"Yes," said Aubrey mendaciously. "I was going to Bridport, and thought I'd just stay here for the night. Then, this morning, I called on the chance of your being still with Madame Gascoigne."

"It is my last week here," she said. "I have a right to make the most of it, have I not? Madame, you hear? What do you say?"

The old lady seemed unable to say anything very clearly. The suggestion was alarming in its suddenness, besides being unconventional enough to startle her slow travelling wits. She stammered objections. Renée combated them all. Distance meant nothing in that winged marvel! And they had never been to Cornwall, and she had always wanted to go, and now here was the chance! Incommode Monsieur? But why? If he was going, and there was room, two passengers would not make much difference! Luggage? Well, what would they want except a dressing-bag, and a rug strap? Was there room for that?

Aubrey declared there was plenty of room.

He would show them if they came round to the garage. Renée declared that quite unnecessary. Did she not know the space and convenience and comfort of the beautiful thing! Besides, there were arrangements to make. The servants must be left in charge, and dressing-bags packed, and a motor veil purchased for Madame. Why waste any of the precious hours of the wonderful day?

"And what of letters?" demanded the bewildered Madame. "Money matters too? This impetuosity——"

Aubrey interposed. The tour was to be his affair. A—a wedding present to Mademoiselle Renée, if she would look at it in that light?

Mademoiselle Renée decided it was a perfectly charming point of view. The best wedding present she had received! Fancy comparing salt-cellars and sugar-tongs and toast-racks with a proper automobile tour in—oh, such an adorable car!

She concluded her arguments by smothering Madame Gascoigne with kisses, and hurrying her off to the kitchen to give parting directions to the servants. Then she flashed round upon Aubrey Derringham, and for a moment seemed to contemplate a similar bewildering form of gratitude. However she stopped short at a butterfly touch on his hands, and a whirlwind of thanks for the splendid idea.

It had occurred to Aubrey only five minutes previously and now it was an arranged plan of action.

He marvelled at the audacity of the suggestion, but then told himself that after all it is audacity that carries men to success. Here was an instance.

"You won't let Madame change her mind," he urged. "You *will* come?"

"Trust me! Such a chance is altogether too glorious to be thrown aside. How long do we tour? Three, four days?"

"It is a long way to Land's End," said Aubrey diplomatically.

"No matter! We have a week!" cried the girl recklessly. "One free glorious week, for which I shall have to thank you. Not one single thing in all the world could make me so happy—except——"

"Yes?" questioned Aubrey, as he watched the paling face.

"Except—that my poor Geoffrey was free once more, that I could see him again before——"

Her voice broke suddenly. "No, I won't *think*! I must not! I have cried enough. I want to be happy a little while, and not think of anything—anything in the world——"

Their eyes met. What she saw in his stopped her speech, drew a little puzzled frown to her brows. How strangely he was regarding her.

"Except ourselves," she finished abruptly. "Which sounds selfish and abominable, and is therefore perfectly nice, as all bad things are! Now, when do we start?"

"Will an hour be sufficient for you, or would you

rather have your luncheon first?" asked Aubrey. "We could get it at Bridport, if you like?"

"Ah, yes!" she cried eagerly. "The sooner we go the better. I shall not feel it really has happened until we are off!"

"You don't think Madame Gascoigne will change her mind?" again asked Aubrey anxiously.

"If she does I shall not change mine!" was the defiant answer. "And as it would not be *convenient* that I go a motor tour alone with a young man she must come to chaperone me. You see?"

He saw, and hoped it would be as she said. The mad suggestion of a moment had suddenly materialized into a bewildering reality. He could hardly credit that for long hours, days, they would be together, side by side in cool mornings, sunny noons, moonlit nights. Life was unfolding itself to him in a new fashion. He was not going to question its purport. Sufficient the day and the hour and the joy they brought.

It was odd that he never asked himself how that "sad word joy" was to be translated by such incongruous elements as a motor tour and a school-girl!

CHAPTER X

"TO COMFORT OR CONSOLE"

PUNCTUAL to the moment the car drew up.

An ecstatic face appeared at the door, and hailed it. "It's all right! We are ready! I've told Madame we can buy motor veils in the town. I wouldn't lend her mine. It was my first, and you gave it to me!"

Aubrey Derringham's heart gave a foolish throb. Careless as the words were they seemed significant of some deeper meaning beneath. Then a neat maid appeared carrying a fair-sized dressing-bag and some rugs.

"You will get frightfully dusty," said Aubrey to Renée. "You ought to have a regular motor coat. Alpaca, or something, that would go over your ordinary dress. Get that too, at the draper's in Thomas Street. I'll wait for you."

She nodded. "It can go down to my *trousseau* account," she said.

Aubrey winced at the careless words. They awoke a memory before which the glory of the day and the thoughts of its projects shrank into sudden disfavour. At the same moment Madame

Gascoigne appeared. She evidently had some sense of travelling wraps, and was shrouded in a long loose dust cloak. He helped her into the car, and wrapped a rug round her. She made room for Renée.

"Oh, no! I sit there, in the front," exclaimed that wilful young person. "I am to get out at Talbot's," she added, "and secure a motor coat, and a veil for you, *chérie*."

"Are you quite comfortable? Would you like a cushion?" enquired Aubrey.

"Oh, no, this is a most delightful seat." She leant back and smiled and nodded at them both.

"Ah—but wait till it flies!" exclaimed Renée. "Then—it is to *live*."

Aubrey helped her in, and then crossed to his own seat. He pulled the lever, and they glided off. He drove very slowly along the sea front, and through the main street. Renée made her purchases with surprising quickness, and returned in a long grey coat, that matched her veil. It had a collar that turned up over her pretty ears, and defied dust to disfigure it. She arranged a dust-coloured veil over the old lady's close-fitting toque, and then sprang up to her seat beside Aubrey; a cool grey figure, with flushed cheeks and eager eyes.

They had to make a detour for the main Dorchester road, and then ran through Upwey, and its pretty wooded valley. Thence past Maiden Castle, with its stupendous earthworks reminis-

cent of Roman invasion, and so through the quaint old town to Dorchester.

From time to time Renée would look back to talk to the old lady, or demand admiration of the scene, or the car's progress. At other moments she insisted upon being told the various meanings of regulating or changing speeds, use of brakes and handles and throttle and lever, until at last she suggested driving it herself.

"Wait till we get to Cornwall," said Aubrey. "Then one morning I'll find a quiet deserted road, and you shall experiment. In the meantime if you watch me you'll acquire the *technique* of your lesson, before the first trial."

She did watch him very closely, and got into her head the methods of changing speeds "up hill," and the mode of steering or driving by the curious round wheel which demanded equal skill of left and right hand.

At Bridport they lunched and rested an hour. Then they ran on, and began to ascend the heights which dip gradually to the coast, and so lead to Charmouth and Lyme Regis. At that enchanting spot they halted again for tea, and, as Madame Gascoigne said: to shake off dust for a time. Aubrey had suggested Exeter as their stopping place for the night, but as it was only thirty miles further, he advised waiting till the cool of the evening. Madame had her tea, and was then shown to a room to rest and refresh herself. Renée, having delivered up her dusty wraps to the

attentive "Boots," declared she must run down to the sea. Aubrey put up the car and accompanied her.

The exquisite little seaside nook enchanted them as it does most people on first sight. The "Cobb" seemed infinitely more desirable than the Weymouth Pier, with its garish modern Pavilion. The little town, nestling amidst wooded hills, breathed of peace and harmony to tired souls. They sat down on the sands, and watched the boats and the children at play. Then Renée wished to know if they couldn't motor only in the early mornings and cool of the evenings, and spend the intervening hours "exploring," as she termed it. They pored over the "motor map," and traced the mileage, and Aubrey discovered they might really spend two days in accomplishing 173 miles!

He laughed to himself as he said it. An average of 86 miles a day for his Mercedes. But if Renée had suggested ten, he would have agreed. Eagerly she planned where they would stop; what they should do, and see. It involved a good deal of circumlocution as to route, but of that Aubrey made light. A week seemed long enough to do anything her wilfulness desired. At last they put aside the map, and an elaborate pencilled calculation of Renée's own making, and returned to the "Lion" for Madame. A quarter of an hour later they were again switchbacking over hills, and heights, and dropping gradually down to the Axe Valley.

Long before they reached Cornwall Madame Gascoigne expressed herself "enchanted" with her first experience of motoring. Well she might, for everything ran on velvet, so to say. Aubrey telegraphed for rooms and dinners, so that every stopping place meant convenient arrangements. The long days in the open air induced sleep, and a pleasant sense of fatigue. Madame would retire early after dinner, but Renée usually insisted on seeing the special sights of any town where they stayed. Aubrey Derringham had to provide himself with guide-books, so as to satisfy her ardent curiosity on every point.

The Wednesday night found them speeding over the bleak Cornish moorland, which stretches from Penzance to the Land's End. Renée had decided she must see that famous promontory under the most romantic auspices.

"Don't speak a single word to me!" she commanded. "Just leave me alone till we come right up to the cliff, as far as we can go. I know it. I've seen the picture, and I want to *feel* what it must be—the end of the land; the end of England, and before one the great raging ocean, and the far-off lights of the Scillies! Let me see if it is like that! I hope so. I do so *want* it to be!" They had left Madame Gascoigne at Penzance, she having decided to visit Land's End and other notable places by daylight. But she had not gainsaid Renée's wish to go off in the moonlight with their kindly guide. It was a queer fancy, but

the child was full of queer fancies, and if it pleased her to see that wild place under odd conditions why—she would see it. There was no more to be said.

The trustful spirit of the old French lady put Aubrey Derringham on his honour. She never seemed to think that the beauty, and youth, and witchery of her young charge might hold any power to fire a man's pulses; or tempt his senses into paths where they had no right to stray. To Madame she was still "the child." Still the adored and spoilt creature who had been her charge so long. The nearness of her marriage only seemed a safeguard where other men were concerned. Aubrey Derringham knew of it, therefore Aubrey was safeguarded.

Had she seen the young man's face, or pried into his heart as he sat beside that silent girl, she might have altered her opinion.

The car sped swiftly over the stony road. Past granite towers of queer little churches, and granite houses in queer little villages. Past hedgerows and outcrops of the same stony substance. There was no colour in the landscape. It was all dull grey, and dull granite, save for queer patches of moss, or lichen, or a spark of mica where the moon-rays caught the stone.

Nothing seemed to move in that shadowy greyness. No figure; not even a stray sheep, or a wandering dog. To Aubrey Derringham it seemed like part of a dream, in which he acted mechanically. A dream from which he was awakened by

the thunder of the sea, and the lights of scattered houses.

He stopped and turned to his companion. "We must walk to the cliff," he said.

She made no answer, save to throw her rug aside and spring out. Aubrey loitered a moment to switch off the engine. Its noise seemed to jar with the peace and beauty of the scene. When he turned to follow the slim grey figure it was far in advance. The ground was all broken granite and rough turf, leading to the dangerous edge of sheer stony cliffs. Below, the sea broke and thundered over boulder and reef. A mile away rose the tall shaft of the Longship lighthouse. To the south towered the Wolf, and all before them lay the wide Atlantic, heaving and restless as a chained force restrained by savage strength.

The cliff towered above a jagged mass of broken rocks, whose outer points severed the advance of the water like the teeth of a saw. Nothing seemed alive but those restless waves, the ever dominating voice of nature's strength.

The girl was standing motionless on the cliff edge, gazing down at the fierce turmoil below. Aubrey joined her, and stood silently by her side, awaiting her pleasure to speak. Once as he glanced around he thought how utterly alone they were. How removed from all the falsities and insincerities of the world beyond. Just the sky, and sea, and the solemn peace of night, and that strange harmony of the restless waters at their feet.

Suddenly the girl drew a long deep breath. "What little foolish things we seem—here!" she said.

"I was thinking that," said Aubrey.

"Chattering, laughing, pretending," she went on. "As if our stupid affairs mattered to the Creator of *that!*" She pointed outwards to the great silvered ocean, so vast, so mysterious, so unutterably beyond man's power to control, or defy.

"Pretending?" echoed Aubrey, snatching at the one word which was self-revealing.

"Pretending to be important; to be happy; to want our lives changed for us because—because we have changed to them."

He was silent; startled by the expression of her face, as she lifted her head to the clear moonlight. All its soft young beauty seemed to quiver with passionate resentment. What did it mean? What had changed *her* life, or its outlook?

She put up her hand, and pushed the hair from her brow. Then she moved a few steps backward. "It makes me giddy. I had no idea the sea could be like that."

"You have seen it only as a bay."

"It is awful!" she whispered. "So strong, so fierce, so merciless. . . . Is life like that—ever?"

"Yes," he answered. "Very like that. A relentless force carrying us on and on, to—achieve our destiny, or face our failures."

"Face our failures; our defeat, you mean. We are not so strong as nature, are we?"

"That's a puzzling question. Not so strong as the force you are facing there, below. That's why one hopes that mistakes will be forgiven. They're so easy to make; so hard to remedy."

"I was thinking of Geoffrey," she said.

"I was thinking of—you."

When he had said it he felt angered at the folly of such a speech. She turned quickly to him.

"Of me? . . . You think I have made a mistake?"

"I have grown to know you rather well, in these long days together. The more I know of you the more afraid I feel for you."

"You don't like my marriage?" she said, very low. "Is it the fact, or the person? No, it can't be *that*. You don't even know him."

"I have seen him," he said impulsively.

"Where?"

"In the Court, that day when—when I first saw you."

"You can't judge of a person's character by just seeing them—once?"

"Perhaps not. An opinion looks like prejudice." Again she sighed.

"I'm beginning to wish I'd never met you," she said. "You make me *think*."

"Perhaps it is as well you should begin to do that," he said, "if you are so soon to take the responsibilities of life upon your shoulders."

Impulsively she seized his arm. "Oh, but that's just why I wanted these seven perfectly *empty* days! I know that never again will such days or hours come to me. . . . I don't want to spoil *one*. That's why I wish you hadn't been—been so different——"

"Different?" he echoed.

"From them. From George, from Geoffrey. I know no other men. Father doesn't count."

"And am I very different from George and Geoffrey?"

She nodded, and released his arm.

"Absolutely. I can't understand why. Look here," she flashed round again. "As I'm speaking out my mind tonight, I want to ask you something."

"Ask," he said tersely.

"You mustn't be angry. I know I oughtn't to. But, the others don't care, and they don't believe in him as I do."

"Believe—in who?"

"In Geoffrey, in his innocence. I have learnt that after three months he can receive one visit from a friend. Father won't go, nor George. I can't. There's only *you*. I made up my mind I'd ask you. And when I stood there, and looked down at that fierce raging sea below, it seemed to me like life, gripping, pressing one down to depths of despair! Oh—I don't want my poor boy to get desperate! I want him to know—someone—believes in him, and loves him, and

remembers him! And I want you to go and tell him that."

Aubrey felt too astonished for words. "But—I'm not a friend," he stammered. "He might think it an impertinence if I visited him."

"Not if you say I sent you."

"And what of his brother? He may ask why he did not come?"

"Perhaps he will. Say you don't know, that's all."

"And you think he will rest satisfied with that? Hadn't I better say he is on his honeymoon?"

She flashed round like a fury. "How perfectly hateful of you to say that! And tonight of all nights!"

Aubrey tingled with shame at her passionate words.

"Please forgive me. It was thoughtless."

"Cruel!" she said. "Didn't I tell you I had emptied my heart of *everything*, just for seven perfect days, and now—you've spoilt it all!"

"I—I didn't know——"

"Not only have you hurt me, but you want to hurt Geoffrey. What would he think of my getting married, only three months after he had been condemned to such a fate?"

Aubrey was silent. He could not tell her how illogical she was. He was afraid of tears. They seemed dangerously near her eyes. If she wept, he felt his self-command would go to pieces. It

was hard enough to keep it under control, even as things were.

"Why don't you speak?" she went on presently. "Have I asked something you don't want to do? If so, just say no, at once, and there's an end of it."

"But I want to see Geoffrey!" he exclaimed. "Don't you know I've always believed in him?"

"Then why didn't you say so at once, instead of—very nearly quarrelling about it?"

"Because, you ought to consider your cousin's feelings, even if you don't trouble about him."

"Geoffrey would be only too glad that someone from the outer world had remembered. If you said what I told you to say, he would know you were a friend of mine."

"Listen to me, you child of impulse!"

"No, not if you're going to argue. That'll bring all the trouble back, all the memories I've put away. If you are my friend, as you said—once, then all I want is for you to say: 'Yes, I'll go.' We needn't talk about it any more. We needn't spoil—a night like this. We shall understand it's a compact, and when I get home again I'll tell you the date, and how to apply for admission."

"Perhaps I could find that out myself," he said. "My brother is a friend of the Home Secretary. I could, I think, procure an order independently of the family."

"Then it is—yes?"

"Of course," he said.

She regarded him gravely. "I've often wondered," she said, "if you were some great person? You've let out so many things, and you seem to know so many people. Yet 'Mr. Derringham' doesn't convey anything to me. If you were Lord Derringham now——"

Aubrey laughed. "I assure you I'm only a plain 'Mister.'"

"And you seem so rich?" she said thoughtfully. "Yet you have no business, or profession? Madame was saying yesterday that she could not imagine why you should have taken all this trouble about us? It wasn't as if you knew us? We were never even introduced, were we?"

"Do you think that matters?"

"With you—no. But it might with some men. Now, really and truly, why did you bother to take us this motor tour?"

"Simply to give you a pleasure you desired."

"But isn't it rather unusual for—people, almost strangers, to do such generous things?"

"You called me selfish, and I felt I must rise above such an accusation. For goodness' sake don't talk as if I'd done anything very wonderful! Here was my big empty car, and my stupid empty life. What better use could I have found for them—than—than just what I have found?"

She turned her soft eyes to his face. There were tears in them now.

"To think I called you selfish! You, who never

seem to think of yourself at all, only of us and for us. It's I who am a selfish little beast! Making you do everything I want, never asking you if it's a trouble, or if you want to do it, or, or——"

"Oh, hush!" he said, deeply shocked at the misapplied epithet. "I've enjoyed these days more than any I've ever known. As for trouble—it's been no trouble to go where you wanted to go, or stop where you wanted to stop, or let you hold the steering wheel on a quiet road. I'm only sorry that we've come to the end of the trip, so far. Of course there's the return journey."

"But every day will mean going back instead of going on," she said regretfully. "And I'm not 'empty' now, I've begun to fill up again. Thoughts, duties, memories, they'll all come crowding back as soon as we leave Cornwall. And that's tomorrow, isn't it?"

"There's plenty of Cornwall to see, besides this," he said. "And I thought we might return by a different route."

"But still it will be *return*. Do let us stay here all tomorrow? Friday is soon enough to go back."

"Too soon, if you ask me," he said.

"That sounds nice. I am glad we haven't bored you."

She moved away a few steps, and stood again looking down at the foaming waters.

"It is wonderful, and I shall always be glad I saw it with you," she said softly. "Often and often I shall think of tonight and how you said

you believed in Geoffrey, and that you would do what I asked."

He thought jealously that she spoke of Geoffrey Gale more often and more tenderly than she ever spoke of his brother. Then a sudden sharp suspicion rushed through his mind. Could it be that it was the younger brother she loved? And was she sacrificing herself for some reason of which he, Aubrey Derringham, was ignorant?

CHAPTER XI

“AS ONE WHO LIES AND DREAMS”

“ALL the best things of my life have come to me at night,” said Renée suddenly.

Aubrey Derringham started from a long reverie in which thought had revolved like a squirrel in a cage, round and round from one special centre.

“My first friend, my first motor drive, and now—this!” She pointed to the silvered width of the sea, and the great broken battlements stretching far and wide as the land’s defence against its force.

“Oh! I am glad I saw it at night,” she went on. “I am glad I saw it with—you.”

“Isn’t there someone you would rather have had in my place?” asked Aubrey, striving for indifference yet jealously fearful of reply.

“No,” she said promptly. “You suit it, and me, and the way it all came about. I shall love to think of that long silent drive; that great purring thing conveying us so swiftly and surely through lonely spaces. The stars above, the cool air in my face, and all *this* waiting for me.”

She paused, but he said nothing. What was

there to say? She was only a child, speaking as frankly as a child speaks.

"And now it's over," she said suddenly. "We must go back. I wonder if I shall ever come here again? Somehow—I don't think I shall want to. Things never happen twice in the same way, do they?"

"No," he said huskily. "You can't repeat an emotion, in exactly the same way."

"Will you ever come here again?" she asked. "But of course you will. You are free to do what you please, and your car is like the Genie of the Lamp. You say: 'Take me here, or there,' and it obeys."

"I wonder," said Aubrey suddenly, "if—I might—?" He broke off abruptly. He hated to say the one word that would excuse a gift, however costly.

"Might—what? How you do break off your sentences tonight."

"I was wondering if I might send you a little car? Just for yourself? Easy to drive, and keep in order."

"A car! For myself! My very own! You perfect angel of a man, do you really *mean* it?"

She clasped his hand in both her own. Her face was joy and wonder incarnate. Her eyes like stars.

"Of course I mean it. I've seen the very thing. It only holds two, and is so simple a child could drive it."

"But then, there's the cleaning, and repairs,

and a place to keep it in? Oh—I'm afraid it can't be! Besides, George might not like me to have one."

"You're surely not going to sign away your freedom with your name?" said Aubrey savagely.

The magic of the night was in his veins. He wanted to see that rapture kindle for him; to thrill at her warm handclasp, and know himself the bringer of all that joy and delight which overflowed from eyes and lips.

"It will be yours—yours alone. A gift from a friend. He can't interfere. Besides, why should he? Life will be dull enough for you in one of those remote Devon villages. A car to take you about over the moors, and through the lanes, will be a little relief from the dulness."

"Relief? It will be heaven! But——"

"Never mind the 'buts.' We'll find a way to answer them. I'll give you a few lessons, and it will be quite an easy car. They're specially made for ladies. You're sure to have a gardener, or some man of all work, attached to the place, and he'll be able to keep it in order. If he can't, there's a garage in nearly every town. The car would be looked after there. By the way, what will be your nearest town?"

"I don't know," she said.

"Don't know?"

"The parish is called Shapsdown. George said it was very remote, and the church very old."

"I will look it out in the guide-book," said

Aubrey. "Unless"—he paused, and glanced at her excited face. "Unless you'd like to *return* that way?"

"But it's somewhere up on Dartmoor, miles and miles from towns and roads. We'd never be able to get there!"

He laughed. "You forget the 'Genie of the Lamp,'" he said.

"No, I don't forget." Her face grew troubled. "I don't *want* to see the place," she added, "only to know if there is a town anywhere near."

"Well, let us go to the town, not to the place."

"But could we, really? In three days? I want to be in Manchester on Monday, and I must go back to Weymouth first."

"You would have to sacrifice the idle day you promised yourself *here*. We must get back to Plymouth, and branch off to Dartmoor. But I must look at the map."

"You really are a perfect angel!" she repeated. "What is it one calls 'the time of one's life'? That's what you're giving me."

"Oh, my dear," he said, with sudden passion breaking through restraint, "what is there I wouldn't give you—if I only might!"

She stood quite still, and looked at him with the puzzled wonder of a child. What had he meant? Why was his face so white, and his eyes so strange? A momentary fear came to her in that moment. The fear of some force she had called up, and which threatened disaster.

"Let us go!" she said hurriedly. "Madame will be anxious. She said I must go to her room when I get back, and tell her all about this."

She turned quickly towards the car, and Aubrey followed. What madness had prompted him to betray himself? To startle that dreaming peace of girlhood, and shake her trust in the friend whose care she claimed? He said not a word, only helped her to her seat, and wrapped the rugs round her slender figure. Then he started the engine, and sent the car back over the bleak moorland, with its weird cairns and crosses and circles, and so past the little hamlets of St. Buryan and Sennen to that pretty Cornish seaside resort—Penzance.

Not till they were in sight of its lights did Aubrey break the silence. Then he said softly: "You're not angry with me, Miss Renée?"

"Angry?" She turned swiftly. "Why, I've been thinking it all over again, and wondering why you are so good to me?"

"But you've not spoken a word?"

"No more have you."

"I waited your Highness's pleasure," he said, with an effort at lightness. "I promised to do everything you wished tonight."

"You're spoiling me!" she cried passionately. "Madame was quite right. She said so, and I—only laughed."

"Please laugh again?" he entreated. "For it isn't true, I couldn't spoil you. Indulgence hurts

no one so young, and frank, and innocent as yourself. And the greatest pleasure I've ever known has been this—happy time we've had together—you and I."

"You and I—and the car," she added. "Yes. It has been happy. I'm glad you're not bored, after all. I'm only a foolish schoolgirl, not much company for a man, I should say."

"I wish I had never had—worse," said Aubrey passionately. "But there, child, for goodness' sake don't let us get sentimental. We've steered clear of that, so far. Now, there's tomorrow to think of, and plan for. I'll have it all cut and dry. We needn't make too early a start. You ought to see Mousehole, and Newlyn, the artists' quarters here, and there's Saint Michael's Mount. I'll take you to them all, and then, later in the day, we'll start for Plymouth again."

She clasped his arm in her impetuous way. "You dear man! I think I love you almost as much as Geoffrey!"

And again Aubrey's heart said jealously: "Is it—Geoffrey—after all?"

The night of Friday found them at Tavistock.

Aubrey and Renée had pored over maps and measured mileage, and come to the conclusion that it was the nearest town to her future home. But it was odd that the girl refused to go to that special home, where her life was to be spent.

Her slender finger, tracing out so many names, so many meanings, had paused—once—at Princetown. She looked at Aubrey Derringham, and he read what was in her mind.

“But—he—isn’t there,” he questioned.

“No, not yet. He may—be.”

“Good heavens!”

In a flash he seemed to read some fresh trouble in store, linked with association, carrying her into a region of danger and perplexity. If Geoffrey was drafted from his present quarters to that remote convict prison at Princetown—would it not be a constant reminder of his proximity?

He looked at the map. Princetown was only seven miles from their present stopping place, and the little parish of Shapsdown was hidden away in one of those dips of the moor above which tower the granite tors of Crockern and Hessary. It was so small and so insignificant as not to be worth guide-book description. Aubrey wondered why it needed a Parish Church or a rector and supplementary curate at all? The thought of burying such lovely bright youth as Renée’s in so desolate a region seemed an absolute cruelty. Quickly his eyes scanned the names or unimportance of the scattered towns. Plympton, Ashburton, Chagford, Moreton Hampstead. Well, at least there would be some semblance of life there, and the little car would bring her into touch with it. The history of the great moor suddenly began to live for him in this history of tor, and hut circles;

of barrows and cairns. He wondered it had never occurred to him to motor over so interesting a district. He pictured its rugged desolation; its granite strength; the fantastic ridges and formations, which had made some sixty miles of prehistoric history, and had now become a tourist-exploited region with a fame of its own.

"Why are you staring at that name?" asked Renée at last.

He glanced down to where his finger rested, and saw a name that conveyed nothing.

"Two Bridges."

"It's a queer name," said the girl. "Why are there bridges on a moor?"

"I don't know, unless there's a river. We seem deplorably ignorant of the locality." He turned to the hotel guide-book and read: "'Two miles in an easterly direction we cross the Blackbrook by a clapper bridge'—there's the explanation."

"But only one bridge!"

He laughed. "Shall we go over tomorrow and see if there are two?"

"Oh—shall we?" She sprang to her feet. "But—wait," she added. "Isn't it near—Shapsdown?"

"A few miles. But there's no motor road."

She glanced to where Madame Gascoigne was placidly slumbering in a deep old-fashioned chair by the fireplace.

"She might wish to see it."

"Well, why not?" he said sharply.

She looked at him as if surprised at his tone. "I told you I didn't want to go there—before I must."

"I suppose you have a reason? But it seems to me that now you are so near, your [future husband might reasonably expect you would feel sufficiently interested in his parish to visit it?"]"

"What a horrid prim speech! I'm not interested, and I'm not going. We've found out all that's necessary, haven't we?"

"But we could have found that out by the guide-book."

"Yes, I suppose so. Only I wanted to see what Tavistock was like."

"There are places nearer and more convenient for your car," he suggested. "I really think we ought to explore a little."

"Aren't you very tired of driving so long, and so far?" she asked suddenly. "It seems such hard work."

"It isn't exactly—easy. But the car has behaved so well that I don't mind."

"May I try it on the moor, if we go?"

Aubrey laughed. "That's saying you want to go after all?"

"I do, and I don't. I want to see it—with you. But I don't want *you* to see—*that* place."

"We will pretend that it doesn't exist. There seems to be a charming hotel at this 'Two Bridges.' Let us lunch there, and do a little of the moor on

foot. Madame can have her afternoon rest. We will come back in the cool of the evening. The next day we start on the homeward route. We shall have to travel all day Sunday."

She looked at him thoughtfully. "And you go back to London?"

"Yes. I'm going to see about your car."

"How am I to learn to drive it, if . . . if you send it?"

"I will send someone to teach you. He is my own chauffeur. Excellent, and very careful. He can stay until you are quite perfect."

They were both taking it for granted that George Gale would make no objections either to gift, or instructor.

The sky was dull and overcast next morning. There was a promise of rain in the air. Madame Gascoigne decided that she would not go up on the moor. She had read of it as a wild lonely place, and pictured it devoid of shelter, or habitation. She requested to be left at the comfortable "Bedford," and announced a determination to see what there was to be seen of the town. The long days in the car were a little tiring, though she would not acknowledge it, and she rather desired a day to herself.

So Aubrey Derringham and Renée started alone over the wide splendid road, and made their first acquaintance with the region that was destined to play an important part in their lives.

At first sight Dartmoor looks like some mediæval giant's playground. A place of rugged crests and curious peaks; of rushing torrents, and semi-volcanic upheavals. Everywhere are grotesque shapes; everywhere are rock and granite, shattered and disintegrated by some freak of nature. Yet in some softened mood she has tried to atone for such freaks by a gift of lovely gorges, of wild ravines, of green valleys, melting into huge tracts of morass and bog. Wide and well-cared roads cross and re-cross the moorland; ascending to heights, dipping to river beds, bringing to town and village the tourist, or explorer, or some student of nature bent on geological information.

Clouds were still ominous when the car reached the hotel at Two Bridges. The place looked very desolate. Crocker Tor was shrouded in mist; the grey stone hostlery looked bare and uninviting. But as they entered Renée gave an exclamation of rapture.

She had stepped into a long low room, where a cheerful fire blazed welcome. Low tables, and chintz-covered chairs and couches gave a modern yet homely touch. After the bleak moor and cold grey mist, it all looked delightfully home-like and inviting.

Such a place in the midst of such a desolate region was a surprise. It turned out to be a favourite summer resort for anglers, a crowd of whom came in to lunch.

"Princetown is just above," said Renée, who

had been talking to an attentive waiter. "He asked if we were going there. Most people do."

"But we decided that we wouldn't, you know? This is a dreary region. I think Madame Gascoigne was wise to remain behind."

"Shapsdown is only six miles off," said the girl, with a sudden shiver.

She looked out of the queer little casement at the bleak tors and the rushing stream. Then suddenly her face paled. She turned to Aubrey, who had come up to her side.

"Did you see those two fishermen, just coming in!" she exclaimed breathlessly. "One of them is my cousin—George!"

CHAPTER XII

"FOR FETTERED LIMBS GO LAME"

ALMOST on her words the two anglers came into the warm bright room, carrying their rods and baskets.

The girl went swiftly forward, and Aubrey, watching, caught sight of the astonished face of the young cleric as he recognized her.

She explained matters in her usual "taken-for-granted" fashion. But a very sullen and disconcerted introduction followed. It might have been only natural that a prospective bridegroom should object to his fiancée's explanation of a motor tour, suddenly arranged, though adequately chaperoned. But when the originator was a good-looking young man and the chaperon had been unwarrantably left behind, cordial greetings were scarcely possible.

Aubrey Derringham felt that explanations only complicated the situation. He stood there stiff and uncomfortable, while Renée rhapsodized over the joys of motoring, and her own efforts in that line.

She had introduced Aubrey as "a friend of Madame Gascoigne's—and mine," and George

Gale got into his head that he was a resident in Weymouth.

"Were you going on to Shapsdown?" he asked Renée. "You might have told me."

"I didn't know. I mean I only wanted to see what the moor was like. We just stopped here for lunch."

"We may as well lunch together," said Gale. "If—Mr. Derringham has no objection?" he added stiffly.

Aubrey had to murmur acquiescence, and pretend a sociability he was far from feeling. The day was spoilt for him. Doubly spoilt when the Curate suggested they should drive over to his "moorland cot," as he called it, so that Renée might give her opinion on various matters. The girl treated the suggestion with cool indifference, but he argued so persistently that refusal looked ungracious.

"I don't like Dartmoor at all," she announced. "Those great bare spaces, and hideous old tors, like frowning giants in the background. And they say there is always mist, and storm, and cold even in summer time. Look at that!" she nodded towards the window, where all outward view was being gradually excluded.

George Gale looked, and his brow darkened. It was not likely he could persuade them to motor over a rough road, in one of these Dartmoor mists.

"It may lift," he said. "Half an hour makes all the difference sometimes."

"Do you often come here to fish?" asked Aubrey.

"Not very often. I happened to meet a college friend, who is doing a walking tour, and we arranged a fishing excursion for today, but the mist spoilt it."

"I shall come here—often," observed Renée, looking round approvingly. "I like this place. It is so home-like. I shall make my sitting-room just like that; all chintzes and panelling; rose and cream against brown and white. I hope there is a room—adaptable. Long and low, with little latticed casements?"

"The house is very small," said George Gale. "But the rooms are low ceilinged enough! There is no chintz yet," he added. "I left decorations to you."

"Ah—that will be something to do!" said the girl eagerly. "When I have my little Runabout, I can go to the towns and get what I want quite easily."

"Runabout?" questioned George Gale, in a puzzled tone. "But, my dear, I don't keep any sort of conveyance. The old rector has a village cart, and a boy to drive it. He says it is to be at your disposal."

"A village cart!" Renée's eyes flashed contempt at such a proposition. "I am going to have a little motor car, and drive it myself. It is the best wedding present I've had, or shall, or could have."

"A wedding present! That alters the case. But who is the generous friend who is going to present you with it?"

"This—" Renée laid an impulsive hand on Aubrey Derringham's arm.

"*You*—Mr. Derringham?"

The uplifted eyebrows and cynical smile annoyed Aubrey.

"It is nothing," he said. "A little Runabout just to amuse Miss Jessop, and prevent her forgetting how to drive. They are useful in country places."

"No doubt," said George, somewhat arrogantly. "Still, I was not aware you were such a very old friend of the family as to feel it incumbent to give any wedding gift to my wife. Least of all so costly, and unusual a one!"

"How perfectly horrid you are to talk like *that*!" exclaimed Renée. "He's the kindest and most generous friend I've ever had. And Madame Gascoigne doesn't object to the present, so why should you? If I'm to be buried alive in these desolate regions it will at least be a compensation."

"Flattering to me," said the young man, trying to smile, but succeeding badly.

Renée shrugged her shoulders. "I never pay compliments, you know that. Besides it holds two. I can take you about in it also, unless you're afraid to trust yourself."

"I should have to see that you were efficient, for both our sakes."

"You need have no fear," interposed Aubrey. "The man who brings the car down will be able to teach Miss Jessop all about it. They are very simply constructed, these small ones."

"But where is it to be kept, and who is going to clean it and look after it? It strikes me, Mr. Derringham, that this princely gift of yours will be somewhat of a white elephant to a country curate's wife!"

Aubrey flushed consciously. The words held possessive significance.

"That's what we came to see about today!" exclaimed Renée. "Why can't it stay here, until you build a motor house? For, of course, you will, and isn't there anyone in the village who could wash and clean a little motor car? If not—I'll do it myself."

"I could hardly allow *that*," said George Gale superciliously. "I suppose if you—and Mr. Derringham—have decided on a car, there's nothing more to be said. It only remains for us to accept the gift, and be duly gratefully for its—doubtful benefits."

"Us!" flashed Renée stormily. "Please remember, George, that the car is *mine*, and I can quite well see to its upkeep! There's no need to create difficulties, where none exist."

His face whitened. "I beg your pardon, I'm sure. You see this is a surprise to me, though an accepted fact to yourself. Let us say no more about it."

Aubrey felt at once enraged and uncomfortable. He had had no thought of George Gale when he proffered so unusual a gift. Possibly the young man was right in his estimation of it as "extraordinary." Aubrey had thought only of Renée. Her pleasure, her comfort, her amusement. Now it seemed there would be trouble over this too generous proposal. If it brought her annoyance it would have been better not to have offered it.

Instinctively he felt he hated George Gale, and that the dislike was mutual. Yet jealousy was not unnatural in a prospective husband who had suddenly come upon his bride touring the country with a comparative stranger. Renée had given the impression of friendship with Madame Gascoigne, but half a dozen words from that excellent lady would have exploded the fiction. Irritated as he was at the *rencontre* Aubrey Derringham felt Gale's attitude was excusable. Renée's admissions as to his wedding gift had added fuel to the fire of his resentment. Altogether it was a most uncomfortable luncheon.

It appeared also that Renée had not thought fit to acquaint her *fiancé* with her movements. He had pictured her in her own home in Manchester. A not unnatural surmise considering that their wedding day was but a week distant.

"I told father," she said. "I thought he would be writing to you. I'm going home on Monday. I wanted a holiday badly. Thank goodness I got the chance of one!"

George Gale tried to look pleasant, and accept her frank confession as part and parcel of her well-known wilfulness. But he lacked *savoir faire*, and his pretence was a poor one. To make matters worse the mist had settled down so determinedly that a visit to Shapsdown seemed impossible. It was like a thick grey curtain, blotting out distances, and confusing nearness.

Aubrey Derringham felt it his duty to leave the engaged pair to themselves over coffee, and made some excuse about fixing up the hood of his car. Renée threw him a reproachful glance from her cosy seat by the fire, but he was by now in a thoroughly bad humour both with her and himself. It was an unpleasant situation, and had awakened unpleasant memories. The dislike he had felt to George Gale in the witness box was increased ten-fold by his manner and his words. They were rivals by instinct, and they recognized the fact. He left Renée to make the best of it, and went out.

His car was standing in the open frontage before the hotel. The sound of rushing waters came to his ears. He could trace the footpath, and the road. But sound was muffled, and the air had grown strangely chill. It would be a dreary progress to Tavistock. He almost decided to light his lamps. True they were going back the same way, but he remembered the steep hills, and twists and turns, and the chance of meeting other motors, and vehicles. Princetown had a curious fascina-

tion for moorland visitors. While he was looking at the dreary scene George Gale came out of the hotel and approached him.

"I am going to ask a favour of you," he said. "I would rather you did *not* give my cousin so expensive a wedding present."

"Indeed!" said Aubrey curtly. "What is your objection?"

"The acquaintance seems to me of too recent a date to warrant such a gift."

"I never go back on a promise," said Aubrey coldly. "Besides, the car is ordered."

"It could be countermanded."

"If Miss Jessop desires it; not otherwise. She is still in a position to express her own wishes, and control her own actions."

"She is very wilful, and by no means the best judge of what is fitting for a young girl to accept from a comparative stranger."

"You seem bent on starting your married life with a grievance!" exclaimed Aubrey. "I understood the matter was settled when I left you a few minutes ago?"

"I did not wish for a scene, and Renée is quite capable of making one. I thought it better to appeal to you, your sense of what is due to me and our position."

"I was under the impression that the early Victorian attitude of obedience and humility was no longer a necessity of that position. It seems to me a somewhat selfish action on your part to

wish to deprive your cousin of something to which she is looking forward so eagerly."

"Had I been in Weymouth," said Gale savagely, "this tour would never have been undertaken. I regret that you can't see the matter in the same light that I do. I can only repeat that I do not consider a motor car a fit possession for a curate's wife, with a stipend of a hundred a year."

Aubrey started. "I understood Miss Jessop's father was a very wealthy man?"

"The neighbourhood, and my parishoners, will judge of my wife by what they know of me. I live humbly and quietly; she must do the same. She has consented to marry me; she must suit her whims to my standard, not her own!"

Aubrey's blood tingled with indignation at the insolent attitude and arrogance of the man. With difficulty he controlled his temper, for he felt that a quarrel under such circumstances would be fatal to future acquaintance with Renée.

"I regret you are adopting such an attitude," he said at last. "But I never go back on my word. The car will be sent here. You may do what you please with it after it is here."

He turned on his heel, and went back to the stable yard to summon one of the men as assistant in raising the hood and lighting the lamps. George Gale looked after him; his lips set in a hard line; his eyes dark with anger. "Insolent puppy! It's as well he should be shown his place! If he dare send that car now——"

The sentence was unfinished for Renée came to the door, and called out that she was ready to return.

It was not pleasant to see her spring to her seat beside the driver as if action and attitude were frankly familiar. Not pleasant to watch the tucking in of rugs, the quick gestures, the questions and replies signalling "off."

The girl waved her hand, the car glided smoothly into the misty distance, and George Gale stood there looking after it with anger in his eyes and murder in his heart, could that heart have been read.

They drove swiftly and silently; the soft curtain of the mist enfolding them; in both minds a sense of injury and opposition.

Aubrey said nothing. He was determined that hers should be the opening speech, and apparently she had no desire to allude to the recent disturbance. Now and then she stole a look at the grave face by her side. How good he had been to her—this man—and how hateful to think that someone would soon have the right to interfere with their frank, delightful intimacy?

"I suppose," she said, breaking the silence at last, "I couldn't break it off *now?*"

Aubrey gave a quick startled glance. His thoughts had followed hers; he did not question what was to be broken off.

"You are a free agent I imagine in the matter of

your own future. It is very important. A woman should be quite *sure*."

"How can one be that? What can we know of men before we belong to them? I thought I knew George and Geoffrey. But today—well, it was a new George. I suppose there will be a new Geoffrey—if we ever meet again."

Aubrey was silent. In her simple outspoken way she had hit upon a truth. The truth that underlies sex inequalities, and will underlie them as long as there is a world of women and of men.

What did the one really know of the other, until they belonged to each other, in that strange uneasy bondage which means everything—or nothing?

CHAPTER XIII

“TO FEEL ANOTHER’S GUILT”

A LIMP and melancholy Renée descended at the Bedford, and sought her room without apology or explanation. It was left to Aubrey to explain the happenings of that last little jaunt. For it was the last, and he knew it. Renée refused to come down to dinner, and the next morning they set out on the return journey. A thing of heat, and dust, and speed in which the girl showed little interest or enjoyment.

“When do you go back to London?” she asked him, as they drew up at Madame Gascoigne’s door.

“Tomorrow,” he said briefly. “Is this to be good-bye, or may I come round for a few moments—this evening?”

She hesitated. Then looked up and met his eyes. “Yes, about eight o’clock.”

Aubrey told the old French lady that he would call at that hour, and then drove off weary, dusty, dispirited; asking himself why he had ever embarked on so foolish an enterprise.

The wrench had come at last. The dividing of

the ways. She would go to Manchester on the morrow, he to London and the Albany and the old life of which he was so tired.

He stood in his room, and looked out at the bay and the familiar ridge of Portland. Was it only a week since he had stood there, alert, eager, keen on this project? Willing to sacrifice peace of mind, just for a girl's brief companionship? Well, it was all over. He could never have such a tour again—nor she. At that thought conscience pricked him. He had not dealt wisely with this girl if, by word, or deed, he had stirred her unuttered discontent into active unhappiness. And that she was strangely altered, broodingly unhappy, he knew. Was it because of that little jarring interlude, or because she had read something in George Gale's eyes which had made her uneasy? Aubrey sighed and wondered. Intuition was a purely feminine gift, and served the sex as a safeguard from inexplicable and unspoken dangers. Some such flash of intuition had warned Renée Jessop of danger in store for herself. Without a word of explanation Aubrey Derringham knew that. Knew it, and feared for her, and asked himself if it would be more dishonourable to interfere, or to leave her to that danger—unwarned?

Renée was in the garden when he went round to say farewell. Madame Gascoigne was busy unpacking wedding presents and *trousseau* fineries in the room where he had first seen that girlish

figure in its first abandonment to sorrow. He walked out through the open French window, and joined her where she stood leaning on the railing and looking over the bay. His step made no sound on the soft turf. He was beside her before she knew it, and he saw that her eyes were full of tears.

He said nothing for a moment, but both had learnt to recognize silence as a danger. These long pauses, filled by heart beats, unspoken desires, tremulous uncertainties, had become part of the magical week in which they had learnt to know each other, and to fear the knowledge.

She spoke at last. "There was a letter from Geoffrey. Would you like to see it?"

Geoffrey had been far from his thoughts. The words were like a douche of cold water to a fever patient.

"It is private, isn't it?"

"Private? It was read by half a dozen people before it was sent! Even *that's* forbidden, to write as he feels and thinks. But the date is fixed. Twelfth of August. Will you go?"

"You still wish it?"

"Oh—I do, I do! There's no one else I can trust to tell me the *real* truth!"

Aubrey was silent. He felt that Fate was driving him into a tight corner. When he got there—what would happen?

Perhaps his face expressed some sense of the irony of the situation for she said: "You don't

care about doing it as much as you did—before—you met George?"

"Frankly, I don't," he said. "Your cousin may take objection to a second intrusion on his private affairs."

"His? They are as much mine as his—more! He does not love Geoffrey as I do."

"I suppose you would wish me to write a full and particular account of—the interview? Perhaps you forget that you'll be married by then?"

"No, I don't. How can I?" She half turned, and looked at the open window, and the busy figure. "All *that* reminding me!" she went on. "But I don't want you to write, I want to see you. Letters are stupid. You'd never tell me all I want to know."

"To see me—impossible!"

Aubrey spoke quickly; a vivid picture before his eyes of bleak moorland, and a stern, revengeful face.

"Why—impossible? If I choose to ask you to my home who can prevent it?"

"Your—your husband I suppose," stammered Aubrey. "He did not like me. I'm sure he wouldn't care to have me on a visit."

"Ah—" she said quickly. "You shall stop at Two Bridges, and I will come there."

Aubrey felt desperate. "Would it be wise? Believe me I had better write."

"You don't *want* to see me again!" She flashed

round. "I know, I feel it! Well, I won't ask you. You're another disillusion."

She turned and walked a few steps away. They brought her to an iron gate leading to the road outside. She opened it and was gone.

For a moment or two Aubrey stood by the railings too confused for action. He saw the white figure flash out into the space between the road and the sea. He noted its impetuous progress. He asked himself should he follow it? Then, with a rush of angry pride, he recalled her last words. "A disillusion." That's what he was, in a school-girl's memory.

If that was all why trouble to strengthen the impression? He had spent time and thought on a thankless service; been the slave of a thousand whims and fancies. This was his reward, because he would not consent to the rôle of tame cat in the future!

One of those extraordinary revulsions of feeling that at times rouse a man's hurt pride to dignity swept over his heart. He saw himself the victim of an infatuation that had made him do many foolish things, and checked the impulse of wise ones. He recalled the contemptuous flash of those eyes of Renée's, he watched the young erect figure marching into distance, and he said to himself: "Better to part so, and now——"

There was enough anger and indignation between them to rob sentiment of any danger. He

could not have held her slender hand and looked into her eyes—here—in this enchantment of sea and moonlight, without danger. That he confessed. The confession braced him to action. He too turned on impulse and walked swiftly to the house. He made a formal speech of farewell to the old French lady, and answered her enquiry about Renée by saying she was still looking at the sea.

“The poor child, she loves it so; she will hate to leave it,” murmured Madame Gascoigne. Then she thanked him warmly for the “great pleasure” of that motor tour, hoped to see him again, when he chanced to visit Weymouth, and so accompanied him to the door with all her nation’s grace and superfluous compliment.

Still proud and angered, Aubrey Derringham returned to the Gloucester. He went to his room conscious of the sudden fatigue of one who has laboured hard, and done—nothing. Passion and disappointment had burnt up his nervous power for the time being. He felt a sudden desire for the stir of life, the nostalgia of cities, the restlessness of action. He told himself he had been a fool and dreamt a fool’s dream. Yet all the telling and all his cynicism could not blind him to one fact.

His hour had come, and he had rushed to meet it. It had come—and gone.

The next night he was back in his own comfortable quarters in the Albany, ministered to by

Chaffey, and awakened to results of impetuous action by a word.

"I've got the car, sir. A Renault—the very thing. The moment I had your telegram I went to Long Acre. They showed me all their stock. I was allowed to try this. She's a beauty. Anyone could drive her after a couple of lessons. I had her put aside for you to see, but I'm sure, sir, you'll agree she's the very thing for a lady." He looked apologetically at his master's grave face. "Your—young lady, sir, might I ask?"

Aubrey's lips whitened. "No, you fool, of course not! It's for a wedding present."

"I beg pardon, sir. You'll excuse——"

"I shall want you to take the car down to its destination," said Aubrey sharply. "You will stay with it, and give the lady necessary instruction. She is a clergyman's wife."

Astonishment struggled with respect in Chaffey's expressive visage. A clergyman's wife? Not even daughter, or widow? What had come to this eccentric master of his?

"Yes, sir. Of course, sir. But you——"

"Oh, I'm going to—Norway," said Aubrey hurriedly. It was the first name that occurred to him. "Yachting," he added. "I shan't want you. Take a month's holiday."

"Thank you, sir. Might I ask—where the lady resides, sir?"

"Dartmoor," said Aubrey. "A little moorland parish. Do you know Two Bridges?"

"Do I—know?" Chaffey's face was a study of conflicting emotions. "Do I know Princetown, or the old Bailey! You don't mean to say, sir, I'm to go to Dartmoor?"

"Oh—I forgot!" Aubrey looked at the perturbed face with sudden compassion. "Really I never associated you with the place, Chaffey, when I arranged this business."

"Thank you for that, sir. But it might be a bit awkward?"

"Nonsense! No one would recognize you now. It's years ago, and a chauffeur's dress and goggles would disguise—the King of England!"

"That's true, sir. But when I'm not driving where am I to stay?"

Aubrey reflected. "I think you'll have to decide that for yourself," he said. "There's the hotel, or perhaps they'd take you in at some farm-house, or cottage. I'm not sufficiently acquainted with the district to mention any particular spot. You'll soon find out. It won't be for long."

"Why can't I stay at the rectory, sir? Doesn't the lady wish it?"

"There's no room, no stable even. The car will have to be garaged at Two Bridges. Shaps-down is five or six miles off, and a very bad road."

"But where will the lady keep her car, sir? It will be very inconvenient to have to tramp five or six miles whenever she wants it, and back again, when she's done with it?"

"I know. But there seemed no other way, at present. Perhaps she'll build a motor house later on, and keep it there."

Chaffey said no more. It was a somewhat mysterious business. He wondered if it had anything to do with the change in his master? With restlessness, late hours, much smoking, and absinthe. All of these represented a variation on the boredom and cynicism of a former Aubrey Derringham. All of them marked the week of his return. Then came a morning when a brief look at the *Manchester Courier*, forwarded by post, sent him to and fro the outlying districts of London as a scourge to poultry, and stray dogs, and feeble-minded pedestrians. The nights following those police-defying expeditions were more or less disastrous to former peace and temperance. Chaffey was alternately bewildered and alarmed. Then he hit upon the clue to the mystery, and apostrophized it mentally as "a jade." The jade had something to do with the mysterious wedding gift, he felt sure. He became curious as to the sort of clergyman's wife who was to have a car of her own, and yet lived in a remote moorland district with impassable roads, and no motor accommodation.

Another week went by in which Aubrey Derringham watched the posts with feverish anxiety, but the expected letter never came. Evidently that visit to Geoffrey Gale was not to be paid by

him. He bitterly resented the indifference shown to his existence; he thought out and wrote a dozen different letters in which irony and hurt feelings and studied indifference struggled for adequate expression. He sent none of them. And then one morning Chaffey came to him brimful of that mysterious sort of information he always managed to obtain.

"You know that young chap, sir, as was had up for the forgery case, well, they say he tried to break out of prison. He's forfeited all good conduct privileges, and they've drafted him to Dartmoor."

Aubrey was startled into something more than attention. Was this outbreak the result of that privileged visit which no one had troubled to pay? Had the boy been driven to desperation by neglect and coldness? Was Aubrey himself, in a manner, the cause of these renewed hardships, he, and his petty scruples and his paltry human dignity? He looked at Chaffey's perturbed face, and read in it a great pity and regret.

"It will be harder, there, will it?" asked Aubrey.

"Harder! I believe you, sir! 'Tis a cold, brutal, dreary place, and they works you to death, and the poor chap, he won't get no letters, nor visitors now."

But Aubrey Derringham's mind was far away, drifting over a sea of strange happenings. A boy's face of white despair, staring from a dock; a girl's tear-filled eyes. A misty space of bare wide moorland through which trickled the music of a

stream; the savage fury in a voice proclaiming what was due to a husband's right of decision. The chill of estrangement, of misunderstanding, laid its cold touch upon his heart once again. He saw a white figure flying into distance, outlined against a moonlit sky, a width of waters. That had been their parting. No word, no sign since then. She was disillusioned, he was savagely affronted. That visit to the prison had never been paid, and now Geoffrey Gale was to be immured in that stony, impregnable fortress set amidst a moorland waste, standing as a memory in its desolation. A constant reminder to the girl who would be within sight and reach of it before many days were over her head.

Chaffey coughed an apologetic reminder of his presence. Aubrey started and came back to facts.

"Oh—you're there still! I forget. . . . You were saying——"

"I was goin' to say, sir, that it seems queer, don't it?"

"Queer?"

"That I should be goin' up there now, to Two Bridges didn't you say, and he at Princetown. Seems as if we couldn't get away from him, sir, somehow."

A harsh groan escaped Aubrey Derringham. "I wish to God, Chaffey—" he said, "that you'd never persuaded me to go and hear that Forgery Case."

CHAPTER XIV

“WHOSE FEET MIGHT NOT GO FREE”

It was unusual for Aubrey Derringham to linger on in London after the season had sounded its note of dissolution. Altogether unlike him to frequent Park and Club in an endeavour to secure any sort of companionship favourable to any sort of interest that would pass away the hours from noon till midnight.

One such endeavour found him the host at a small dinner given at his own Club to two or three bachelor acquaintances. One of them was Joshua Myers, the barrister.

Aubrey had come across him by chance, and given a hasty and accepted invitation. He learnt that the Daniel Schultzes were at Cowes, and that the beautiful Miriam had not captured her Dukelet after all. Musical comedy had rivalled her. As consolation she had hurriedly secured a foreign Count, who hailed from Italy, and was concerned with Argentine prospects.

Myers expressed some natural surprise that Aubrey Derringham was not at society's aquatic pleasure resort. The “yachting trip to Norway”

served as an explanation, but the keen-eyed barrister read something amiss. This was not the languid, bored man of fashion whom his set and his Club had known so long. Neither was it quite the curious questioner who had studied the *pros* and *cons* of criminal technique—up to a certain point. Something had roused him from languor to restlessness, had quickened his sympathies to life, and yet left him actively dissatisfied.

“Are you as much interested in the psychology of crime as you were, Mr. Derringham?” he asked, in an endeavour to secure Aubrey’s wandering attention.

“I—oh, yes! It’s a subject that has its fascination as well as its dangers.”

“You mean—that a criminal can cease to be an abstract figure in the general outlook?”

Aubrey gave him a surprised glance. “Why do you say that?”

“Am I right?”

“I don’t know any—criminal, other than the press, or the pages of a novel have introduced to me.”

“I thought you knew that young Gale, who was sentenced for forgery some months ago?”

Aubrey’s face remained impassive. “No, I don’t know him.”

“His family, then?”

“What makes you think so?”

“That little matter requesting permission to visit Portland, for one thing.”

"But he was not at Portland."

"Not then."

"Do you mean to say he is there now? I thought it was Dartmoor?"

Then Myers smiled. "Didn't I say you were interested. How else could you know he had been drafted to Dartmoor? The press gives no information of that sort."

Aubrey was at a loss for explanation. How could he say that he had learnt of this fact by accident, when no accident could have betrayed it.

"I met his brother, up on the moors," he said suddenly.

"His brother, the curate?"

"Yes."

"Oh, but I wonder how he knew! The boy was foolish enough to try to escape. That brought the rigours of prison law upon him. He had to forego privileges, and do harsher tasks. That's why he's being transferred."

"Dartmoor is as impregnable as Portland, isn't it?" asked Aubrey.

"Not quite. There have been escapes from the moor. Portland is guarded by sea and land both. It's next to impossible to get away from there. You were near Princetown then? Had you the curiosity to visit the famous prison?"

"No. I was at Tavistock, and only motored a little over the moors. I did not go near Princetown."

"And yet," thought Myers, "you were keen on

seeing Portland, and you knew—somehow—that young Gale is going to Dartmoor.”

Aubrey turned the conversation to a more frivolous topic. A new star of musical comedy whose advent, late in the season, had heralded lucrative engagements for the Autumn.

“It was good of her Grace of Barleycorn to retire in her favour,” said Aubrey. “One star goes out that another may shine.”

“And she shines best who shines last,” said young Forrester of the Guards, who was famed for non-copyright epigrams.

“Her voice isn’t up to much,” said Myers. “It’s like listening to the mechanical complainings of a motor car.”

“How cruel!” said the young guardsman. “As if the voice mattered, in musical comedy.”

“I thought it did. Excuse my ignorance.”

Aubrey laughed. “Unlimited cheek, and fascinating outlines are the stock in trade. Shall we go to the smoking-room?”

There was a general movement. As they left the table a page came up to Aubrey and handed him a letter. He glanced at it carelessly enough. The writing was unknown. Then he looked at the post-mark. With a sudden flush, he turned aside, and opened the envelope. Very brief were its contents.

“DEAR MR. MOTOR-MAN:

“I’ve been a beast. Do forgive me. I’m back again on the moor. Am I to have my Runabout?

Or have I been too wicked and ungrateful for forgiveness?

“Your unhappy little friend,

“RENÉE.”

Aubrey crushed up the letter, and thrust it into his pocket. What a child she was, and how apparently unchanged! How could he have harboured such resentful feelings against her? He felt as if a sudden weight had been removed from his heart. As if a troubled dream had given place to morning's light and glory. He followed his three friends into the smoking-room, and astonished them by a burst of wild spirits, disjointed witticisms.

No one was more surprised than Joshua Myers.

What had changed lassitude and cynicism into eager enjoyment? Brought smiles to the lip, and joy to the eye, and a certain rollicking lightness to the voice of this incomprehensible man? A woman? A message in that letter? Surely this and nothing else could account for the change brought in a moment of time?

“The common fate of the common multitude,” he thought to himself. “I wonder who she is? His tastes are too exclusive for light loves, or passing *amourettes*. I wish I could see the postmark of that letter.”

If he had seen it he would have been more bewildered than ever. What was there in common between this aristocrat of Clubland and a little insignificant townlet on the wild moors of Devon?

Two days later a car was running merrily over the hilly twisting road from Moreton to Two Bridges. It held two occupants, both men, capped, coated, goggled to face that wind-swept desolation, which is the happy meeting ground of every wind that blows. Merrily the little car sped up hill and down, dipped into hollows, breasted stony heights, hummed its merry song of speed and progress as the miles fell back, and finally drew up before that delightful hostelry which defies even mist and cold to lessen its attractions.

At the doorway stood a slender figure, watching with intent eyes the graceful down-coming of that pale grey Renault. Renée's figure and Renée's welcoming voice. Yet Aubrey was conscious of a shock as of one who expecting a friend meets a stranger.

"I didn't think *you* would come," she said, and then a hot flush crept from throat to cheek, and spread to the delicate temples. Her eyes fell. There was something in them to hide now. She knew it and he recognized it. He broke the embarrassed pause by a murmured apology for his presence.

"I wanted to be *sure* it was all right. I came with Chaffey, but I'm not going to stop."

"But is *that* the car? Oh! it's much too good! What a perfect little beauty! I thought it was only going to be a little wheelbarrow sort of thing, or I wouldn't have written! That's fit for a princess."

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"It is for you," he said gravely, "if you will honour me by its acceptance."

"I don't know what George will say!"

She was looking at the grey cushions; the bright brass, the beautiful "latest" improvements that specialized this splendid wedding gift.

Aubrey Derringham heard an unpleasant reminder in those words. "Haven't you settled the matter with him?" he asked.

"Oh! I told him I expected the car. He only said: 'I hope it won't prove more trouble than pleasure.'"

"He—is not here?" asked Aubrey, glancing round with involuntary repugnance.

"No. He is busy with some parish work. Oh! may I try it?" It was the old Renée, impulsive, eager for the moment's joy, casting care to the winds of chance.

"Try it? Of course! Shall I come with you, or Chaffey?"

"Oh, you, please!" She twisted a motor scarf round her small close-fitting hat, as Chaffey left his steering wheel, and went to the stable yard for water.

"She's gone beautifully," said Aubrey. "We've come on from Exeter. Did it in a little over an hour. How's that?"

She smiled up at him; less radiantly than of old. "Splendid! What a gem! Show me the mechanism, will you?"

He explained briefly. "It's so easy and so

light," he said, "after my big Mercedes. You'll be quite at home with it in a couple of hours."

Then came the lesson, an easy one for both. A thing of trials, and speeds, of hill flights and turns. Renée's light hand and quick eye served her well. The car had no complicated gears and levers to worry her. She brought it back to the hotel, and to the admiring Chaffey in a mood of ecstasy. Not one word had she or Aubrey said of that parting "tiff," or of her marriage. It was the immediate moment for both. No more; no less. The car took up all their attention, and repaid it.

"You will stay and have some tea?" she said, as they drew up before the hotel again.

Aubrey hesitated. "I was going on to Tavistock," he said. "If I may borrow your car, Chaffey will bring it back. It can stay here until you make other arrangements. He remains for a week or more, as you desire."

"But—do I need him?"

Aubrey smiled. "I think it would be better to have someone, just at first."

"You're coming in?"

She moved towards the door and he followed her. Chaffey watched them, and muttered below his breath: "Clergyman's wife! Golly! Here's a lark!"

They had tea in the charming chintz room, and Renée presided with matronly dignity. There

was no one else there, and they soon dropped into the old friendly duologue. It almost seemed as if those intervening weeks had had no existence. Once Aubrey found himself wondering whether she knew that Geoffrey Gale was to be sent to Princetown? Might even be there already. He did not like to mention the fact, and she did not allude to her cousin. It appeared she had been to Paris, which was hot and stuffy, and crowded with English and American tourists.

"Not a bit like Madame Gascoigne's Paris," she said. "The only thing I liked was the steamers, going up and down the river, and once I went to Versailles to see the fountains. I suppose you know Paris very well?"

"Almost as well as London. It was the wrong time of year to go. Didn't you know that?"

"I?" She looked at him and again that hot flush crept up to her temples. "I had nothing to do with it. George said we were going, and we went."

An embarrassed silence followed. Aubrey drank his tea, and trifled with the cake on his plate, and wondered what to say next. She saved him the trouble of a subject by asking if he was staying in London. "I wrote to your Club on chance. I hardly thought you'd be there. I suppose you thought it was awfully cheeky of me?"

"Not at all. I was—delighted."

"I was so afraid we shouldn't be friends again," she said softly. "You've no idea how horrid I

felt. A dozen times I tried to write, and couldn't. I said to myself: "He's gone off without a word. He's really offended *this* time!"

Aubrey laughed despite the gravity of her own expression. "I should have sent the car all the same," he said.

"Would you—really? How good you are to me! I wish I could do something for you in return. But there—you're rich and happy, and life must be just splendid."

"Not altogether—happy," he said. "But who is? Except a child who lives in and for the moment, and asks nothing of the future."

"That's what I was," she said gravely. "It seems so long ago—now."

That "*now*" almost broke down his fund of reserve. His determination to ask nothing, hear nothing of changed conditions.

"I don't lack brains. I'm not a fool," she went on rapidly. "But, it appears one must only speak, think, act, as directed, when one is married."

Aubrey was silent. She had referred to the subject at last, and as she referred to it he thought of the wilful imperious girl who had been his companion for one magical week. She had seemed happy then, and content. Her face had been eloquent of life and joy. It was grave now, and perplexed, and the eyes were shadowed by unrest.

"Did you know it would be like that?" she said abruptly. "Are all men tyrants? It is cruel that we are not allowed to know, that we are

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kept ignorant, and then—snap—the chains are round us, fast and sure. Ugh—it's hateful!"

She sprang up and went to the window. Aubrey felt powerless. What could he say or do? The situation was at once delicate and perplexing. He rose also, and rang the bell and paid for the tea. As the waiter left the room, she turned and came back. There were traces of tears in her eyes. They looked up at Aubrey as a child's eyes might look; a child wounded and hurt, and unconscious of doing anything to deserve the hurt.

A wave of hot anger surged through the young man's breast; his whole body seemed one nerve of fierce repressed feeling. He was a man, and she only a child. A child rudely awakened to the meaning of life and womanhood; rebelling instinctively against the fate which had made her helpless before the tyranny of nature, imploring help when no help was or could be given.

He sent her home in the car with Chaffey. At least it was to take her as far as the road rendered progress possible. "And remember," he said, as he bade her farewell, "it is yours, and you are to do what you like with it. The man here will clean it and look after it, and come every day for your orders, when Chaffey leaves."

"I can't thank you," she said brokenly. "But—if it's any good to know it you've done the one and only thing that could bring a little pleasure into my life. Am I to see you—ever again?"

"Oh, yes, I hope so," he said huskily. "If you wish it. You know my address. A word there will always find me."

"I shan't forget," she said, and gave him her hand.

He put the light rug about her, as if it were part of the car, and went with it, and watched her pull the lever and clasp the steering wheel. Chaffey grave and impassive sat by her side. She threw back a smile and waved her hand.

"It's not good-bye," she cried, "only *au revoir!*"

Then the grey car and the slender grey figure melted into the faint rose of the fading twilight. Aubrey Derringham listened to the throb of the engine, and the little tinkle of the stream as it flowed beneath the bridge. There came to his heart at that moment a sudden chill of fear. He could not say what he feared, or why. He only knew that like a spectre out of the dusk it crept up to, and close to him; so near, so close, that the fever died out of his veins, and his pulses seemed to beat by sheer effort.

"What's come to me?" he thought, and glanced round and about half fearful of some tangible presence to be translated into meaning. But there was no one. Nothing. Only from afar a faint "hoot," like a signal of farewell, and below at his feet the ever murmuring stream.

CHAPTER XV

“AND BY EACH SIDE A WARDER WALKED ”

A WEEK had passed and still Aubrey Derringham lingered on in town, though now he avoided the more public thoroughfares and dined at queer restaurants, or river-side hotels.

No word came from the moors. Nothing from Chaffey or from *her*. He was again conscious of impatience and desire. Why couldn't the fool send some sort of information? But there seemed nothing to do save wait his return.

It happened unexpectedly. Chaffey walked into the Albany and presented himself to his master one evening as if he had never left the one or neglected the other.

Aubrey was smoking discontentedly and trying to make up his mind what special restaurant or grill-room he would seek. The sight of his errant servitor roused him to immediate activity.

“So you're back, Chaffey?”

“To the day, sir, the hour I might say.”

“I expected to hear from you,” said his master.

“Did you, sir? You never mentioned it. I didn't like to take the liberty.”

"Well, well, perhaps it was my fault. How did you get on?"

"Very satisfactory, sir; the lady's a wonder. Drives like a professional I might say. And the car's quite satisfactory, as I said, sir. Not even a puncture yet."

"I'm glad to hear it. Where did you put up?"

"At the hotel, sir. I happened to know one of the ostlers; made it more companionable like."

"I—I suppose so. And the young lady, how is she?"

"In health, sir, she seems all right. But as far as spirits goes a bit—fluctuaty—shall I say, sir. One day as bright and cheery as a spring morning, next, clouded-like and sad, and hardly a word for anyone. It's queer, sir, for I take it she's in her bridal days, leastwise I heard so."

Aubrey moved impatiently. "Did she go out every day?"

"Every day, and pretty well all day, sir. There ain't much of Dartmoor that we couldn't give account of. A queer place it is, sir, when you begins to move about in it, so to say. I came across surprisin' places, hid away so that no one would ever have thought they was there."

"What sort of places?"

"Them 'Clitters,' sir, as they calls them; little sort o' huts built o' them at foot of the tors. Queer sort o' farm houses too with scarce grazing

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for a couple o' sheep, or a stray head o' cattle. There was one place, sir, we came across, the young lady she was wonderful took with it."

"Indeed?"

Chaffey being fairly launched on his subject might be trusted to go on.

"Yes, sir. It was a little house, the queerest little place, in a hollow o' the moorland, sheltered by a big stretch of them tors, and a stream running along at end of the garden. There was a garden, sir, and cultivated proper as if someone had lived there and taken a deal o' trouble with it. Nothing would suit the young lady but to go in and see the house. It was empty and the door unlocked. We went in, sir. I was surprised. Quite a nice room, and a kitchen, and two bedrooms above. A bit dusty and derlapidated of course, but not a bad little shooting-box, so to say."

Aubrey felt interested. "Was no one living there?"

"No, sir, but there had been. An eccentric sort o' writing gent, I was told."

"Who told you?"

"Bill Ockment, sir, the ostler I spoke of."

"And so you explored the place?"

"Yes, sir. That young lady, well she did go on about it, sir. As pretty as a child with a doll's house it was to see her and hear her. She said as how *you* ought to take it, sir, and come up and stay on the moor summer times."

"I!" Aubrey was conscious of sudden height-

ened colour. "Why in the world should I do such a thing?"

"It would be a change, sir, of course. And quiet—there's only fishing, and walking, as you're not a h'artist, or a writer. But since you've begun to take more interest in life, sir, it might bear thinking of. 'Tis wonderful how one gets to love these sort o' places. Makes one feel clean and strong somehow. Beg pardon, sir, I'm talking too free perhaps? It comes of bein' away so long."

Aubrey had seated himself by the window, his face in shadow.

"Go on," he said. "I don't mind. I was getting a bit sick of my own company."

"I was half expecting to find you'd started, sir."

"Started?"

"For Norway, as you said, sir."

"Oh, yes, of course. It's put off till later; end of the month."

"I see, sir. And you're not going to Cowes?"

"No," said Aubrey abruptly.

He wished Chaffey would take into his head to tell him less of that Dartmoor district and more of Renée herself. But he hesitated to put leading questions.

After a moment the man resumed the subject of that moorland retreat.

"I do wish you could see that house, sir. I'm sure you'd feel it was worth getting hold of, just to run down to when you wants to be quiet. Spring time or summer it would be lovely."

"Oh—is it to be let?" asked Aubrey carelessly.

"Yes, sir, or sold. So Bill Ockment told me. Belongs to a old lady in Tavistock. She built it for her son. He's dead, and she don't want it any more. A hundred pounds would buy it."

Aubrey laughed. "You seem to have your eye on the place, Chaffey," he said. "I suppose you see it as an old-age pension reserved for faithful services?"

"No, sir. It never entered my head. It was only you I was a-thinkin' of."

Aubrey wondered why a fresh temptation should have to be met? For it was a temptation. The idea of securing for himself a little retreat within reach of the girl who had called him friend, and who might one day need a friend's help and counsel. He wondered whether Chaffey had ever seen George Gale? It was odd he had not mentioned him.

"And so she used the car every day?" he observed, with as casual a manner as he could assume. "Didn't she ever drive her husband in it?"

"She said he was afraid to trust himself with her, sir."

"But not afraid of her coming to any harm?"

"It seemed so, sir. I didn't like the gent, if I may say so. I only saw him once. That was at the hotel. I think he'd been—drinking a bit."

"What!" Aubrey turned quickly. "Surely you're mistaken, Chaffey? He's a clergyman."

"I know, sir, but a clergyman's only a man, ain't he, sir? And there's good and bad of them same as other men."

"Of course. Their cloth can cover sins as well as proclaim virtues. But Mr. Gale——"

"Yes, sir. He's the brother o' that poor young chap. We've come round to that, sir. I was half afraid to tell you. I've seen him, sir."

"Seen who?"

"Geoffrey Gale, sir."

"Good God! Is that so?" Aubrey sprang up impulsively. "You've been a long time getting to the kernel of your nut. Where did you see him?"

"Just goin' in at the prison gates, sir, one afternoon. Two and two, poor chaps; chained in couples they was, like dogs. I saw him quite distinctly, sir. So—did she."

"Miss Renée—I mean Mrs. Gale?"

"Yes, sir. It was awful, sir, for a moment. I could have cried like a baby. There—I couldn't help it, sir; those two young faces, pale as death, and their eyes, *his* eyes! My, what a story they told!"

Aubrey was silent, deeply moved; his imagination stirred to kindred sympathy. The old jealousy lived again at thought of that meeting, at thought of what it meant for her if she loved the supposed criminal and had given herself to his accuser.

"Then she did go to Princetown?" he said, very low.

"Quite against my wishes, sir. But she would go. And it happened just as I feared. . . . Lor, sir, the way she cried, afterwards, and the things she said, as I drove her home. 'Couldn't I help her to get a word with him? Couldn't some message be sent?' I told her to ask her husband to go and see the chaplain. It might do some good. But she just looked at me. I don't know, sir, if you've ever seen her look like that? Sort of way a child does when you've struck it, and it hasn't done nothing to deserve it. And then not another word did she say all the way home."

"When was this?"

"The last day, sir, we was out. Yesterday, of course. It seems longer somehow."

Silence followed.

"Shall I turn on the light, sir?"

Aubrey started. "No, not yet. I'm going out."

"Can I get out your evening things, sir?"

"No, Chaffey. I'm not going to dress. I think I shall take the car, and run down to Richmond."

"Shall I drive it, sir?"

"Yes."

Aubrey Derringham knew why he had said that "yes." It was an excuse to hear more, without expressing a desire to do so. And Chaffey was not reticent.

During the drive to Richmond he continued his narrative. He threw the side-lights of his shrewd

observation on many points concerning Renée and her husband. He had seen the old rectory too where the ancient vicar resided. He had seen him also.

“Doddering, sir, next door to a lunatic, so it seemed to me. Mr. Gale’s house is very small and dark and unwholesome-looking. A dreary place for that beautiful young lady. I think, sir, if you’ll excuse the liberty of saying so, that that there car will be the saving o’ her reason. Enough to give one melingcholics that place is. A parish compounded o’ ancient tipplers, and scoldin’ dirty shrews o’ women. And the farm houses scattered like plums in a work’us pudding. Such folk too; with their queer talk, and their queer little houses, and their dreadful ignorance. I feel sorry for the young lady that I do. And now, since she’s got to know her cousin’s up there at Princetown, well, sir, I leave you to conjekture what it means. There’s another thing too. If anything happened to that little Renault? I used to think that often. It would have to be sent to Tavistock to be repaired, and what would she do meantime. They don’t keep any sort o’ car at the hotel, nor yet at Post Town.”

“That’s true!” exclaimed Aubrey. “The best car isn’t infallible. And we know what ‘repairing’ means, even here in town. A provincial garage might take a month where a week would suffice.”

“And you can’t give her *two* cars, sir. That’s where the white elephant comes in.”

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Aubrey was silent for a while meditating the point.

"Chaffey," he said suddenly, "did—Mr. Gale—ever see you, or speak to you?"

"He only saw me once, sir. That day when he was—well, what I told you he was. And then I had my goggles on. No, I never spoke to him, so to say."

"He wouldn't know you if he met you, without your chauffeur's dress?"

"No, sir. I'm sure he wouldn't."

"Then, Chaffey, I see nothing for it but—that old-age pension!"

"Sir!" Astonishment very nearly meant a collision with a passing cart. Some bad language punctuated the difference of opinion that ensued.

"Yes, I mean it. I'll take that queer house, and you shall be its owner, and have a small Runabout for emergencies. You need not betray who you are to anyone in the neighbourhood. In fact, you may be a naturalist, or an artist, or some equally unassuming tenant. You might even have an occasional lodger. As you said, Chaffey, the whole region of Dartmoor is full of interest. I have no doubt we should find plenty, if we sought it."

"We—sir?"

"You're not going to object to a country life, and a pension, are you, even if hampered by an occasional lodger?"

"No, sir. I think it's a fine idea. I was only wondering about—you?"

"What about me?"

"Well, sir, who's to do for you, and drive the car, and see to things here? I don't wish to be superseded, if I may say so, sir."

"You shan't be, Chaffey. I'll have only a temporary valet. As for the car I can be my own chauffeur, you know, and the garage people will keep it in order."

"It will be a bit dull don't you think, sir? At least once the summer's gone. Terrible desolate that moor is in winter time."

"One can brave desolation—occasionally," said Aubrey.

"Yes, sir, but, if you'll excuse me sayin' it, how long is this to go on, sir?"

"To go on?" Aubrey reflected over that question. "It is you who are responsible for it, Chaffey," he said presently.

"I—sir!"

"You interested me in that forgery case. But for you I should never have troubled about the fate of young Gale. Never seen Miss Jessop, never——"

"Taken her motoring, sir?"

"I suppose not. One thing led to another. It's led me on, and now it must lead you. Heaven knows how far!"

"Or how long, sir? Perhaps you haven't thought of *that*?"

The lights of Richmond Bridge flashed over the darkness of the river.

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"Yes," said Aubrey. "I have thought of that. *As long as Geoffrey Gale is in prison.*"

Chaffey was silent till the bridge was crossed. Then he said: "Yours to command, sir!"

Master and man dined in their respective fashion at the Star and Garter. Aubrey had ordered the car for ten o'clock, and told Chaffey to have a good square meal. He strolled down to the river when he had finished his coffee and "*fine champagne*," and stood watching the boats and punts as they moved to and fro; listening to the voices that stirred the air with laughter and melody. It seemed to him that this should be *her* life: joy, gaiety, song, and melody, not that dreary moorland and that desolate home of which Chaffey had spoken. His heart ached for her lost girlhood, and her shadowed fate. That fate with which he now seemed irretrievably entangled. Come what might he could not leave her friendless. The hint of George Gale's failing had filled him with sudden alarm. A young inexperienced girl could not cope with horrors of that description. It was not right or fitting that she should. He thought of that week of intimate confidences, interests, revelations. Of how she had trusted him, openly announcing happiness as a daily factor in their lives. Then of her little spurt of anger on that night of parting. Her quick spontaneous acceptance of renewed friendship; the tender gratitude in her eyes when she spoke of his gift as "the one and only thing that would bring a little pleasure

into her life." Well, that was something. Whenever she used the car, or felt it obey her touch, and carry her where she willed, she would think of him. She might even acknowledge that "disillusion" didn't mean severance of friendship. And, if in any time of stress, or trouble, she felt he was near at hand, the fact might give her courage to bear what, he knew, she would have to bear.

The river murmured at his feet, the cool air swept across his face as he stood bare-headed gazing down at the shining water. In that moment Aubrey Derringham touched a greater height of selflessness than he had ever reached. Felt that to renounce and to suffer were better things than to selfishly grasp the moment's joy.

The appeal made to him by a girl's fresh youth and loveliness had been the appeal of sex. The appeal made by a woman's martyrdom meant a call to honour as well as a call to the unselfish depths of an unacknowledged passion.

As he ran through the whole sequence of impressions made by Renée Jessop he was stirred to an intense pity for the life so strangely set to tragic meanings. He felt he could not put it aside from his own save by some stronger intervention than had yet dealt with their joint fate. For George Gale he was conscious only of a feeling of contempt. The man was a coward, and selfish, and weak too as only cowards are weak. He had the courage to persecute, but not to defend. That he loved Renée was undoubted, but it was

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the cruel, exacting love of a tyrant who claims a slave, and shuns a conqueror.

As Aubrey turned back to the hotel he knew that the lethargy and boredom had gone out of his life for ever. Henceforth it was dedicated to an unasked service for which it could expect no reward, nor claim it.

CHAPTER XVI

“ROBBED OF ITS PREY”

AUTUMN winds howled and raged, and autumn rains swept fiercely over the wild wastes of Dartmoor. Up on the heights a man could scarcely stand against the raging gale. Down in the valleys it was a moan and a protest, rising at times to a spiteful effort at destruction of all the hardy produce that had been guarded and stacked and fenced about in an endeavour to preserve some bounty of nature against her erratic cruelties.

A queer little house sheltered itself under the protecting sides of a giant tor. It was built of stone and roofed with granite, and had queer small windows, and a big comfortable living-room very plainly furnished. It held merely a table, a dresser, some chairs, and one big deep Chesterfield couch, that stood by the open fireplace. A range of low bookshelves ran round the side of the wall, filled with odd volumes and quaint bits of pottery, and here and there a photograph or tiny picture framed in dark oak, and in no way distinctive. The walls had been distempered in a mellow orange

colour which contrasted well with the beams of the ceiling, and the dark panelling below.

A great wood fire burnt in the open hearth guarded by a tiled curb. It was the only light. It gave a rich and glowing tone to the room, and played over the dark oak dresser and its queer load of delf and pewter.

The one adjective that described the room was "comfort." On the floor were warm richly coloured rugs, on the big couch some square tapestry cushions. Every chair was low and deep and delightful as a seat. The old gate-table held a big pewter bowl of autumn leaves and berries; before the fire lay a little fox terrier with black ears, and thrown back in a chair opposite the big Chesterfield was the occupant of the place.

At first sight no one would have recognized him as "gentleman's man," or "chauffeur," or any of the attributes that had really meant him a few months previously. His face was tanned to rosy healthfulness, he looked stouter, though that fact may have been only an excuse of loose-fitting tweed clothes; his hair had been suffered to grow long, and he wore a moustache and beard, both of a grizzled and elderly nature that might have meant fifty years of age, and indifference to personal appearance.

He was smoking a pipe, and conversing at intervals to the terrier whose eye and tail gave eloquent attention to the subject of discussion.

"He ought to be here you know, Boxer. A wild

night, and the mist thick on the moor. Can't think what's come to him, always up there nigh them quarries."

He lifted his head suddenly and seemed to listen. The little dog gave a sudden sharp bark.

Chaffey, for it was the ex-valet of Aubrey Deringham, crossed the room and went to the front door, and opened it. A wild gust of wind swept over him and into the hall behind. The heavy curtain of rain and mist blotted out everything else.

He was just about to close the door when a faint "hoot" stopped him. There came the sound of a car approaching at incautious speed, over the ill-made strip of road, whose construction had been one of Chaffey's methods of passing time.

A voice called to him from the darkness.

"Chaffey! here, quick!"

It was his master's voice. He closed the door behind him and went forward. A ray of firelight shone from the window and shot across the intervening space. It showed the dim outline of a car. Beside the driver was something crouched and huddled together, as if it had slipped from the seat. Chaffey came up and tried to peer into the dimness. A voice hoarse and hurried gave rapid orders.

"Get him out, for God's sake! He's half dead! Don't speak! Don't ask anything! Do what I say!"

A limp figure was lifted, thrust into his arms, and the man staggered back to the house.

"I'll put the car in, and then come to you!" cried Aubrey. "We've a clear start of half an hour! Give him some brandy at once!"

The car moved off. Aubrey Derringham knew its position blindfold. He left it in the motor house, switched off the engine, and then rushed into his own habitation, fastening up the door behind him. His eyes fell on the prostrate figure lying on the rug before the blazing fire. It was limp and helpless, stained with blood and mire. A pitiable object enough without its hanging chains and hideous dress.

"Quick, shutter the window!" ordered Aubrey. "Thank God it's such a wild night! They'll not be too keen in pursuit."

While Chaffey obeyed he knelt by the unconscious boy, chafing his hands, trying to get some drops of brandy between the closed lips.

Chaffey came back and tendered his help. "My! Here's a go! He's done it a second time," he said. "How did you find him, sir?"

"He found me! I had heard the guns, and stopped the car. Then someone rushed out of the darkness and cried to me. I saw who it was. I helped him in, and the mist did the rest!"

"But they could hear the car, sir?"

"If they were near enough. But I don't think they were. Not a soul came this way. I think there were two who escaped. See, the wrist

chains are filed, so there must have been another fastened to him. But I asked nothing. The poor boy was exhausted. Ah—he's coming round! Hold up his head, Chaffey. I'll get another drop of brandy down."

The boy's eyes opened, glanced round in sudden terror, and then, catching sight of the two compassionate faces, brimmed over with sudden tears of helplessness.

"Don't give me up," he whispered. "I'd rather die than go back. I'd rather you shot me—now."

"You shan't go back," said Aubrey. "Have no fear, you're safe and with friends."

"Friends!" The wild eyes glanced from one to the other. "I don't know you——"

"But I know you. You're Geoffrey Gale. Come, drink this and try to rouse yourself. Everything depends on the next few hours. They may come here, you mustn't be found. I hardly think they'd search my house, but they might. I want to get you out of these clothes, and—oh, Chaffey, bring a file. These things must come off at once."

The boy sat up, white faced, haggard, with little semblance of youthful manhood about him. He held out first one wrist, then the other, and watched Chaffey's deft manipulation. Then with hurried fingers they unfastened the prison garments, and put him into a loose warm dressing-gown.

"Now you must come upstairs," said Aubrey. "You've got to do a little play acting. Chaffey, burn these things in the kitchen stove."

"Not just at once, sir, if I may advise. The stuff'll take a lot of burning, and, besides it'll smell like the devil, if I know anything. I'll hide them safe enough, sir, but no burning yet awhile."

"I daresay you're right. Don't forget those—chains."

"Don't forget a movable hearthstone," said Chaffey with a grin.

Aubrey took the boy's arm and helped him up the stairs into a bedroom, in which stood an old-fashioned four-post bed. A bright fire burned in the grate, the room was furnished in a comfortable, old-fashioned style.

"Now, one moment," said Aubrey. He poured out some water into a basin, and sponged the blood-stains and the wet earth. Then he opened a drawer of the bureau and took out a white wig. He fitted it on the boy's shorn head, and transformed him into an old man to all appearance.

"Splendid! Now, you'll get into that bed, and keep your face turned to the wall, leaving your head visible. I'll cover you up, and see to the rest. Mind, if there is a pursuit and they come here to search, you're not to move or speak. I shall say you're my father, and an invalid. They'll never think of suspecting you. But I've an idea they won't come, at least tonight. You said your companion went off towards Merivale? Probably they'll think you're together. Now—Oh, those shoes—I forgot——"

He removed them, and then took off the worsted

stockings, and replaced them by a pair of his own. He concealed the prison things under the wood in the square iron wood-box by the fireplace.

"Now, into bed, and in ten minutes' time you shall have a basin of soup. After that, you must try to sleep. Feel sure you're safe. Renée has thought it all out."

"Renée!" The boy started. "Do you mean to say she's helping? I've seen her on the moor. I wondered what on earth could have brought her there."

"Yes, she's helping," said Aubrey. "I am a friend of hers, and I live here. I'm quite above suspicion," and he smiled. "Even if the warders pay me a visit it will only be a perfunctory one. But tomorrow I'll explain everything. I want you to sleep tonight, and only think you're safe."

The boy held out his hand silently. As silently it was taken. Then he got into bed, and Aubrey arranged the clothes so that only a white head showed innocently above them. "Mind," he repeated, "whatever happens you're not to move or speak."

"I'll remember. May I just say one thing?"

"What is it?"

"I'm innocent. I swear it! I want you to believe that."

"I've always believed it," said Aubrey Derringham.

An hour later master and man sat before the

fire in the sitting-room listening to the havoc of the storm. Listening, even more keenly, for sound or signal of any pursuit of the escaped convict. None came. The little lonely house shut away into desolate solitude was scarcely known. Certainly it was too far out of the radius of Princetown to excite suspicion.

When Aubrey visited it he usually arrived at night, motoring over from Tavistock, or Exeter. As for Chaffey, the ostensible owner of Thrushelcombe, he was supposed to be an artist, or a naturalist, or some equally eccentric speciality to whom this wild district and its scenery or geological interests appealed.

On this November night of mist and storm the two inhabitants of the queer stone house were as isolated as if on a desert island. Upstairs, the escaped prisoner slept the deep sleep of utter exhaustion. Below, beside the blazing fire, his rescuer related the adventure. "I don't know what took me there today."

"No, sir? Pure chance of course, sir?"

"Chaffey, you're a brute!"

"Thank you, sir. Perhaps I am, but even they have instincts, sir, and gratitude," he added.

"What does your instinct tell you, Chaffey?"

"That a motor car is a blessed invention, sir, and a disguise, however long 'tis kept, may come in handy at last."

"Yes," said Aubrey. "Trust a woman's wit to think of everything. The one difficulty in the

matter would have been that shorn head of his. I'd never have thought of a wig."

"You don't think, sir, that perhaps the face and the wig are a bit out of keeping, so to say?"

"I do think it. But he will not go out of this house until—well until all search is over."

"And then, sir?"

"Oh, Canada . . . South America, the Brazils, we don't know yet."

"Alone, sir?"

"Do you suppose I do things by halves? He'll go, wherever it is, as my valet. I think I'm above suspicion."

"I hope you are, sir. It's a big risk you're running, and there's a heavy penalty. I suppose—she—Mrs. Gale, I mean, didn't think of that?"

Aubrey moved restlessly. "What does it matter! The thing's done now. And mind you, Chaffey, I'd do it again, not only for him, but for anyone who came to me with despair in his eyes, and desperation in his heart, as—he did!"

"He looks pretty bad. I'd never have known him again. Shall you tell the young lady, sir?"

"I must. But we'll have to be very careful, Chaffey. It's a mercy she has been here once or twice."

"And the reverend gentleman, too. I've a sort of idea he suspected 'twas *you* she came to see. And as luck would have it, there was I, and Boxer there, having our tea as comfortable and innocent as babes in the wood."

"And he never recognized you?"

"Not he, sir. I played eccentric, as you told me. Besides, hinting I wasn't exactly a parishoner o' his, nor too fond o' parsons, at any time."

"Did you think—I mean was there anything about him to confirm your previous suspicions?"

"Was there anything about him?" Chaffey's voice was incarnate sarcasm. "He was just all one shake and tremor. Nigh on D. T., I'd say, if I was giving a purfessional opinion, sir."

"She goes in terror of her life, she told me so—" exclaimed Aubrey. "And I don't know what to do. That's the truth, Chaffey, I don't. I daren't go there. In his drunken fits he abuses me like a pickpocket. He has forbidden her to see me."

"Well, sir, if you'll excuse my saying so, you've brought yourself into a confounded muddle. That's the truth. It wasn't bad enough before, with only the young lady to consider, but now you've gone and got incriminated with this 'ere escaped prisoner. You'll have to pick your steps pretty wary, I can tell you, sir."

"I'm sure of that."

"Of course he's, in a measure, safe, even if they brought a search party here. Not a soul knows of that cave, nor could find it. It seems to me that's safer than the white wig, sir. Night time it would serve, but not by daylight, not with that face. Makes it look younger, sir, not older."

Aubrey paced to and fro the room, smoking a freshly lit pipe as comfort and consolation. He

had indeed arrived at an *impasse*. It was barely a month since Renée had given him a first hint of communication with the great convict establishment on the moor. The hint was connected with a daughter of one of the warders, who lived just outside Princetown. Through the girl's influence, which included a doting father as well as a young and sturdy lover, a message had been given and a message received. Of their nature Aubrey was not informed but he knew that any day a Dartmoor mist, or one of its autumn storms, would be a signal of attempted escape. Escape to a given point on the moor; a point where a little unobtrusive car might happen to be standing. And so it had all come about. For sake of a girl, in pity for her grief, in blind obedience to her entreaties, Aubrey Derringham, a possible peer of the realm, the fastidious, bored, *dilettante* man about town, whom his friends had known only as such, found himself in as tight a corner as ever man had found himself.

He was answerable to the law for his present action. He had abetted and concealed the escape of a prisoner. He held that prisoner under his own roof. And more, in doing all this he had implicated the faithful servitor, whose own records were not of a nature to lighten the position of "accessory after the fact."

No wonder Aubrey Derringham paced his room in perturbed self-communing. No wonder his nerves gave false alarms, and lent a new terror to

the night; the stormy clamour of the wind, the lashing fury of the wind.

And worse was to come. On the morrow Geoffrey Gale was raving in the throes of fever and delirium. And over the wide wastes of Dartmoor mounted officials and zealous helpers were scouring every hamlet and village in search of an escaped convict. One Geoffrey Gale—known as No. 96.

CHAPTER XVII

“THE BITTER LOT THAT WAITS FOR FOOL AND KNAVE”

THE little stone house was not molested. Day followed day, and Aubrey's nerves quieted, and Chaffey nursed and physicked what he termed “a touch of prison fever” with the skill of experience. Quinine, and a milk diet, and cold compresses worked wonders with a physical system too enfeebled for even disease to make claims upon resistance. In three days the boy's pulse and temperature were normal, and he lay passive and content in the old four-poster, asking nothing of life but the peace of the immediate moment. Meantime, his fellow fugitive had been captured on the Plymouth Road, and the authorities ceased to search for No. 96 very assiduously. The boy had possibly perished in that awful storm. Anyway, the local papers made light of the matter, and local gossip convinced itself that only death, or disaster, could have rewarded such a mad attempt.

Meanwhile the bleak and cold of December days sped into weeks. It had been the 28th of Novem-

ber when Geoffrey Gale had been brought to Thrushelcombe. It was the 15th of December when he left his bed and sat by the fire, wrapped in Aubrey Derringham's warm dressing-gown, in nervous expectance of a visitor.

The sound of a car on that outlying clearing, called by courtesy a "road," sent his pulses leaping to fever heat. Renée's car. Clever, tender-hearted Renée, who had thought of and planned all this, and sent him a friend so powerful and so generous! His brain was still weak and confused. He could not clearly recollect how it had happened. That sudden sweep of mist descending on the working party, blotting out faces and figures. The snap of a chain, the hoarse whisper of his comrade, and then flight! Headlong impetuous flight, the irrational instinct of escape. Then the sudden appearance of a figure, the hum of a motor car, a frenzied entreaty, and a quick jerky passage over rough roads, a plunge into darkness, the checking of speed to cautious progress. Lights, humanity, safety!

This represented the fevered memory of his escape, but not its method, or complicity. Of these he was to hear today from Renée's lips. Renée who was now his sister. He must remember that. But when the door opened and he saw her he remembered nothing except that she was Renée. As he met her brimming eyes his self-control vanished.

She came swiftly forward. Her arms were

round him and his head on her shoulder. A storm of sobs shook her. His own eyes were wet.

"Oh! my poor, poor Geoffrey!" That was her cry again and again; every time she looked at the haggard face; at the bruised hands, and the broken nails, at the shorn cropped head, and shaking figure.

"How cruel they have been to you! . . . Oh, God! how changed you are!"

The two young sorrowful creatures sobbed in sympathy; childhood, boyhood, girlhood all merging into memories that set their seal upon this harrowing moment.

Renée first achieved self-control, possibly by aid of that instinctive "mothering" instinct which hates to see a man's grief, and nerves itself to consolation at cost of future self-abandonment. She put him back into his chair, and stood beside him, her hand on his shoulder; her voice strung to a braver key.

"We won't think of it, it's all over and done with. They've not come troubling to look for you, and you're safe here; perfectly safe, Aubrey says so."

"Aubrey?" The boy glanced up, shaking the tears off his lashes. "You call him that?"

"He is a great friend of mine."

"And Mr. Chaffinch?"

"Mr.—Oh, you mean Chaffey? Yes, he too. Isn't he a dear? I don't believe there's a thing in the world he can't do! He's been doctoring you,

I hear. That's another accomplishment. You—you're really better, Geoffrey?"

"Oh yes, the fever's quite gone. I'm only weak."

She turned aside, and fetched a low wooden stool and placed it beside him. Then she sat down and held his hand in hers, and began to talk. There was so much to tell him. Much he wished to hear; much he dreaded to ask. Of her long anxious planning for this, of her care and diplomacy—of Aubrey Derringham.

"Darrell," corrected Geoffrey.

"Oh, yes, when he's here! I forgot."

"Is there some mystery?"

"No, at least, he, we—thought it best his real name shouldn't come out. The house is supposed to be Chaffey's, and Aubrey—I mean Mr. Darrell—comes occasionally as a visitor."

"But I can't understand why he should have run such a risk as this for someone he doesn't know?"

"He was in court. He heard your trial. He never believed you guilty."

"He's told me that. I—I felt I couldn't stay here if he believed it."

"No one with two grains of sense ever did!" exclaimed Renée, with a passionate condemnation peculiarly her own. "Never mind, we're not going to talk of that, at all. But is there really—such a risk, Geoffrey?"

"He'd have to take his chance of imprisonment. I think it's two years."

She sprang up. "Oh, Geoffrey—and I made him

do it! I thought it out, and then suggested about the car, and he's stayed on here, all these weeks, waiting for a chance! Oh! but I never knew—I never thought that he—he——”

She turned frightened eyes to the boy's face. It was pale and concerned like her own.

“You—made him do it? I—can't understand. And George, I thought he——”

“George! He doesn't care. I haven't even told him you've escaped, and the papers never gave your name, only——”

“I know—my number.”

The girl shivered suddenly. The voice from which all music of joy and youth had gone conveyed more than the ill-omened words of pent-up shame and suffering.

“George doesn't *care!*” he went on. “You don't mean that he believes I deserved this?”

She leant her head against his knee, and made no reply. The boy put one hand on that bright head, the other clutched the arm of his chair.

“I am sorry—for you. I often thought he'd turned against me. . . . You've not told him anything?”

“No.”

“But he must have known I had been transferred *here?*”

“He may. He never said. We never spoke of you.”

“One thing I want to know,” he said sternly, “Why did you marry so soon—after——?”

"Father wished it. It was all arranged."

"But you—you could have held out, had you wished?"

"I . . . I suppose so. I never thought of it then. Never till it was too late."

"You're not—happy, Renée?"

"Happy!" She lifted her head, and he saw the change in her; read the hidden secret of her life.

"I warned you, don't you remember?"

She looked away, into the depths of the fire, remembering only too well; remembering so many other things that made up a sum of misery to which every day added another figure.

"My saintly brother! How well he's worked for his object. I suppose your father still looks upon him as the 'white boy' of the family?"

"I have never seen father since I . . . since I came here."

"I couldn't believe you really *lived* here! In this God-forsaken place!"

"Yes, Geoffrey, I do. The parish is only a few miles off. It's a dreary moorland village, the church is crumbling into decay. The rector keeps it company, a senile old idiot, and George—" She paused. Their eyes met. "Oh—I'm ashamed to see him put on the vestments of a priest, or take a service! It's sheer mockery! But very few people come to the church, they all go to chapel. It's wise of them, whether they know it, or not."

"I was always afraid of George—lapsing,"

muttered the boy. "I knew he had a tendency that way. Oh, Renée, my dear! what have you done for yourself?"

"Never mind me! What does it signify? It's of you I'm thinking, Geoffrey. Of how we're to get you away, to some place of safety. It's surprising no one has been here. They came to Shapsdown and Two Bridges, and all the scattered farms and cottages were searched. . . . Oh, Geoff, even *now*—they might——"

"Chaffey, as you call him, knows of a secret hiding place where I could never be found."

"But he can't be always on the watch, to guard against surprises? And if——"

"Yes, they'd make it harder than ever. I got badly punished for that first time, but it would be nothing to what this would mean."

The girl clasped his hand in silent agony. She had thought and planned and worked for this escape so long, achieved it so skilfully, only to learn that the penalty of it would be like a millstone round his neck and hers and that other which she had forced into the same danger.

"Oh! but they must never find you!" she cried passionately. "Already, the stir and fuss is dying out. They think you couldn't have breasted such a storm—that bog, or river, or mine shaft has got you. Aubrey seems quite convinced the search is over. He has a plan. . . . I don't know what it is, yet, but we can safely trust him. He is so clever, and oh—so kind!"

"How did you get to know him?" asked Geoffrey jealously.

"At Weymouth. He was staying there. He took Madame Gascoigne and myself for a motor tour, and then he sent me a darling little Renault for a wedding present. You saw me in it?"

"Yes, but I didn't know it was your own. I thought you might have hired it."

"No, it's my very own."

"What did George say to that?"

"He tried to prevent my having it. But I wouldn't give in. It's just the one little bit of pleasure I have, that car. Wasn't it a blessing that on *that night* it was safe in the garage. They came to the hotel and questioned the stable people, because I had been seen driving it to Princetown so often."

"Hadn't Mr. —, your friend here, been seen in his?"

"He's not so well known. And he never went to Princetown—by daylight."

"Still, if it got known that he was out with his car—that day?"

"They'd have been here before this. It's over two weeks. He isn't at all afraid. He's even talked to some of the warders, and suggested places to search."

"And they don't think it odd that a gentleman like Mr. Darrell should bury himself in this queer out-of-the-way spot?"

"They've not said so. He's supposed to be

writing a book on Dartmoor, that's answer enough."

"He's saved my life, and my reason," said Geoffrey hoarsely. "Another six months and I should have gone mad."

His face changed suddenly. It seemed to shrivel, and grow old and wilted as a leaf the frost has touched.

"Some of them do, you know," he went on presently. "But no one ever hears of it. If you've done evil and are punished it's hard enough, but when you know you're innocent and have to suffer the indignities, the shames, the brutal indifference, the awful hardships—God! That's what makes criminals of men who once loathed crime, as—I loathed it."

"Geoffrey— Oh, hush, dear, hush!"

The blazing eyes, the fever spot on each white cheek terrified her. She rose to her feet. "I must go. I daren't stay longer. But I'll come again, soon, I promise. Meantime, you'll do all—he—tells you, won't you, Geoffrey?"

"Yes, that I will. I don't know why he should be so good to me, why he has put himself into such a position for me. But it isn't likely I'll forget it! I was half dead, a frozen numbed corpse that he brought back to life. That life is his—to deal with as he chooses."

The girl's eyes shone like stars; her lips quivered. She held out her hands and the boy took them.

"Renée, the thought comes to me that some day we'll regret this. That I ought to have had patience, waited till the end."

"Oh, no! *No!*" she cried. "You couldn't, you'd have died! I never saw anyone so changed. . . . I thought when I first caught sight of you, in that chained gang— Oh, my dear, my heart seemed to break. . . . I couldn't bear it. Night and day I saw you, with those chains, and that look of despair in your eyes. If my life could have bought your freedom I'd have given it if only to escape the torture of thought, for, Geoffrey—I *know* who did it."

"So do I," said the boy. "No wonder he tries to drown memory. No wonder he didn't come to see me—suffer—in his place."

Her eyes fell on the thin scarred hands that clasped her own. A silence, sadder than words, marked a moment's tortured hesitation. Then their hands unclasped. The girl drew her veil about her, and turned to the door. His eyes followed her.

"You'll come again?" he whispered hoarsely.

"Yes, as soon as I can. . . . Be brave, dear, it will all come right."

The door closed. The shivering figure sank back into the chair, and hid his face between his hands.

"All come right? . . . How can anything ever be right again . . . for I've lost—her, damn him!"

Aubrey Derringham came upstairs after Renée's departure. He affected a hopefulness he was far from feeling. Chaffey brought up tea and he had it in the invalid's room, and then sat on smoking and talking in the firelight, till it was too dark to see each other's faces.

"It really does seem as if the pursuit had died out," he said suddenly. "I suppose you didn't confide anything to that other man, did you?"

"No, I trusted no one. Besides, I had only the very vaguest hint given me."

"The young warder?—yes, I know."

"It wasn't likely I'd get him into trouble, the only one who spoke decently to me, or seemed to have a spark of feeling."

"They have to be hard," said Chaffey. "Think of the ruffians they deal with, and the risks. A couple of hundred officials against a thousand desperate men, all on the look-out for a chance to evade a rule, or escape from hell's bondage."

Geoffrey Gale glanced with surprise at the excited face. "They're not so bad as they used to be," he said. "You seem to know?"

"I've heard a lot, and I can put two and two together."

"The Governor was very kind," said the boy, "but one warder was a brute. He disliked me. Somehow, I don't feel easy in my mind about him. He'd want proof of death, or escape, before he'd believe in either."

"He was at the hotel, one day. I spoke to him,"

said Aubrey. "A hard brutal type, as you say. I put in an uncomfortable ten minutes when he questioned my fancy for motoring over Dartmoor at this season of the year. I told him the chance of a punctured tyre was preferable to the vagaries of wayside stations, or local time-tables."

"He wouldn't get much change out of you, sir," said Chaffey. "All the same——"

He paused abruptly. "Wheels!" he exclaimed. "My God, sir, I *do* believe——"

"Hush!" said Aubrey. "Don't lose your head now! I'll see them, while you get him away."

Geoffrey sprang up from his chair. "Oh! for God's sake, hide me! Don't let them get me again!"

"Pull yourself together! Do what Chaffey tells you! They shan't get you, don't be afraid!"

Even as he spoke his eyes took in the aspect of the room. Noted that the bed was made, that nothing pointed to a third person's occupancy. He put the tea-table aside, as Chaffey seized the boy's hand, and pressed a panel in the wall covered by a small bookcase. It gave, showing only a well of darkness that meant a staircase.

Aubrey closed it on them, as a loud knock sounded at the door. Then he descended in his usual leisurely fashion, and faced two plain-clothes officials, each carrying a lantern.

CHAPTER XVIII

“HE DOES NOT WIN WHO PLAYS WITH SIN”

THERE was no light in the entrance. One of the men lifted his lantern and it showed the impassive face of the owner of Thrushelcombe tuned to adequate surprise.

“May I ask?”——

“We want to have a look round, sir. We’ve heard a rumour that an escaped prisoner was seen hereabouts.”

“Indeed? I assure you no one has been here—to my knowledge. However, you’ve got your lanterns, you’re welcome to search. There’s the motor house, and the fowl house, and the tool house. Can you find your way?”

“Any objection to seeing *inside* as well as outside, sir?”

It was the harsh gruff voice of the warder whom Aubrey had once seen at the hotel.

“Objection?—decidedly. I can see no reason for any suspicion that needs other defence than my word. I lodge quietly here with Mr. Chaffinch, the geologist. Do you suppose we should be likely to harbour escaped convicts?”

“We’ve been ordered to search every house in the district. I’ve a warrant, sir, if you want to see it?”

“Oh, no. If it’s your duty—why you must do it. But I tell you plainly it’s time and labour lost. Only Mr. Chaffinch and I live here.”

He stood back, and the men entered. Aubrey sought excuse for further parleying.

“Excuse the darkness. We hadn’t lit the lamps. Our hour for a quiet smoke and a chat in the fire-light. If you’ll wait a moment, I’ll get matches. That’s the door of the sitting-room—on the right.”

He went back to the kitchen, leaving the men to examine the other room, hoping that by the time they got upstairs, Chaffey would be back and sitting in the old easy chair in the character of inoffensive scientist, which had accounted for eccentricities.

Whistling carelessly, he came back along the passage, and entered the living room. “Well?” he questioned smiling, and held the lamp above his head.

“Nothing—here, of course,” said the surly warder, whose eyes had strayed in dull surprise over the shelves of heavy literature, a writing-table with piles of MSS. covered with writing and hieroglyphics, and four walls guiltless of anything excepting fitted corner cupboards, and the ordinary prosaic furniture of civilized humanity.

Aubrey Derringham set the lamp down on the table. “Can I offer you anything?” he asked.

"It's a cold night, and you've had a long drive, if you've come from Princetown?"

The surly warder declined hospitality; the other looked regretful.

"I suppose you'd like to see the kitchen next?" smiled Aubrey. "I flatter myself that its conveniences would be hard to beat. My friend and I didn't wish to be bothered with servants, so we've everything to help and nothing to hinder."

He persisted in showing ingenious contrivances; opening cupboards, explaining how wood cellar and scullery and wash-house had been put under cover, so that weather should not be actively inconvenient.

The gruff warder looked at everything, examined the cupboards, and the woodstack, pounced at last upon a queer little twisting staircase veiled by an innocent-looking door, and demanded where it led.

"To the bedrooms. There are only two. Would you like to go up? Do." The man flashed his light up the little corkscrew stairs. A peevish voice from above demanded who was there?

"My friend," explained Aubrey. "He's got a bad cold. He's in his bedroom."

The man went silently up the staircase and came out on a narrow landing-place. An open door faced him, and huddled by the fire sat the figure of the other occupant of the house.

"Two — gentlemen — from Dartmoor," an-

nounced Aubrey. "Anxious to see that there's no suspicious person in hiding hereabouts."

He threw open the door of the second room. Comfortable enough, innocent of any sign that could be construed into suspicion.

The warder looked round. "Two beds—here," he said sharply. "I thought there was only you and the scientific gent livin' here? What d'ye want three beds for?"

"My good friend," said Aubrey, "I might ask you what business that is of yours. An Englishman's home is sufficiently his castle to permit of his furnishing it as he pleases. However, the explanation is too simple for any mystery. There are three beds in this house because I happen to possess three bedsteads. I and my friend furnished it with odds and ends of joint possessions. Also, it might not be quite unreasonable to suppose we have an occasional visitor."

The man turned on his heel. Aubrey breathed a sigh of relief. If the fool had taken it into his head to examine the beds he would have seen that both showed signs of present occupation, and even a scientist could not sleep in two beds at the same time. However, he closed the door explaining that draughts were bad for his friend's cold—a remark that produced a violent fit of coughing and sneezing from the armchair.

The warder flashed his lantern over the firelit room, muttered a surly apology for intrusion, and

then took his leave. Aubrey accompanied him to the door.

"You may as well examine the outhouses," he said.

"You've got a motor car, haven't you?" enquired the man.

"Scarcely a motor car. A little two-seater, that I drive myself. It's useful for getting about."

"You didn't happen to be out in it the afternoon of the twenty-eighth of November by any chance?"

"Twenty-eighth of November," said Aubrey. "What day of the week? I don't pay much attention to dates. One day is very much like another down here."

The man mentioned the day. Aubrey reflected.

"I might have been. Yes—I believe I was. But I thought a storm was threatening, and ran home as quickly as I could. I didn't escape. It caught me at Post Bridge. I was wet through."

"I've got the number of a car seen near where our men got off," said the warder. "Doesn't happen to be yours, I suppose?"

"You'd better see for yourself," said Aubrey. "The key's in the door of the motor house. Now, I'll wish you good evening. If you do find that runaway, I wish you'd let me know. This is rather a lonely place, and my friend and I aren't provided with firearms against desperadoes."

He closed the door. That had been a very bad half-moment. The number of his motor car? How was it he had not thought of that?

"A cool chap, ain't he?" remarked the second warder to his surly companion, as they walked away.

"Cool? I believe you. I only tried that on about the number of his car. I haven't got it. Never had. But I'll take it—now."

Upstairs in the firelit bedroom the "cool chap" listened with beating pulses to the sounds without. Not until the sound of a horse's feet and rattle of wheels proclaimed departure did he speak.

Then he said hoarsely: "By Jove, Chaffey, I was in a blue funk, and no mistake! . . . Well, there's one good thing they won't pay us another visit."

"Shall I—fetch him now?" asked Chaffey.

"No, wait a few minutes. I don't trust that warder. He may make some excuse to come back. That's been done before."

"On the stage, sir."

"Well, the stage teaches many useful lessons. I shall go down now, put up the shutters, lock the motor house, and have a look round."

"Can't I, sir?"

"You forget you're an invalid. I'm going to leave this light here, and this window as it is. We are 'on view' from that dog-cart. Let us play the game, Chaffey."

"Lord, sir! to think that *you* . . . you to whom everything was a trouble, not to say a

bore, to think that you should have risen to emergencies such as these, sir! It's wonderful, that it is!"

"Life's wonderful, Chaffey, when we look at it apart from our own small interests. Stop where you are! I'm sure you make an excellent picture viewed from the road beyond."

He laughed softly, and left the room; cool enough to all outward appearance. Inwardly distraught and perplexed.

With bloodhounds on the scent how was he to keep this boy in hiding, or how was he ever to get him away?

White and shaking and terror-struck, Geoffrey Gale crept from out of his hiding-place. It was nothing but an underground cave that ran for some distance alongside the foundations of the queer house. A place to which Chaffey's ingenuity had discovered the way by means of that very corkscrew staircase that looked so innocent.

The shock coming upon recent illness, and the excitement of Renée's visit, threatened a return of the fever. Aubrey sent the boy back to bed, and Chaffey gave him a sleeping draught of chlorodyne which, if unusual, had at least the effect of soothing his nerves.

Meanwhile the subject of future escape was seriously discussed by master and man.

"You could see they were suspicious," said Aubrey. "That means we shall be watched. It

will be no easy matter to get three people away, when only two are supposed to live here?"

"No, sir, it won't. But what's the use worrying? He's safe enough now. They'll not come nigh us again. And you'll hit upon something, sir, I bet. Never saw the like o' you for circummounting obstacles, sir."

Aubrey Derringham smiled at the remark, but the smile was a bitter one. Well enough he knew that obstacles were not always to be circummounted not even by skill, or thought, or all one's heart's desire.

It was Christmas Eve.

A steely sky shone over a waste of snow that carpeted the moor, and lay on the crests of the Tors, and gave a strange mysterious aspect to that ever mysterious region of peaks and crests and ravines. The cold was intense. Not for many a year had such bitter weather signalized the season. The cattle were safely herded; peat and wood had been brought in and stacked for fuel in every cot or farmhouse. Lights twinkled from out of curtained windows. Here and there a village proclaimed itself as a starry centre against surrounding whiteness. The road lost itself in hollows and breasted heights, with a vain endeavour to baffle snowdrifts. Desolation gave the keynote to the scene. No vehicle or pedestrian would willingly have braved the intense cold, or the baffling tracks.

In the queer little hamlet of Shapsdown the

villagers held high wassail at the inn, where lights shone valiantly, and branches of holly gave a festive touch to the barroom. It was simply an extension of the kitchen, and consisted mainly of a long wooden table, and some benches. The weather was the general topic of conversation coupled with sundry animadversions on the new "passon," who had not been, to all appearance, very generous in the matter of Christmas doles.

The "little lady" had gone to and fro with gifts of tea and sugar, and warm garments for the children, but the old vicar and his young assistant had bestowed nothing more valuable than good advice, coupled with hints of overdue rent, or non-attendance at the parish church.

By way of revenge no assistance had been given in the way of decoration. Not a single offer of holly or ivy had been received. The old mouldy church was left severely alone to its mouldiness and gloom, and judging from expressed opinions the ceremony of a Christmas-Day service would be purely perfunctory. It seemed the height of folly to be going to church on a week-day, celebrating two Sundays between the important duties of five working days.

"He ha' given I a fair order," observed the innkeeper. "Jar o' whiskey went up along, not to tell o' wine cases sent from Tavistock by rail. Seems as ef they be goin' to have a fair frisk up to th' rectory."

"I thought you said 'twas the young passon as liked his drop?"

"So 'tes. But th' ould 'un cud help empty a glass wi' anyone, so 'im cud."

"But who did they wine cases go to?" persisted the intelligent blacksmith, who had closed his forge by way of celebrating the season. "Th' old man, or th' young?"

"Mister Gale av course. Didn't I zay so?"

"Yew only said as 'ow they'd been sent by rail. Yew don't suppose 'twere for us? Maybe we oughtern't to ha' neglected th' church. Th' old man did use to giv' us a shilling or two cum Christmas time. Th' young 'un——"

"Well, this be 'is fust Christmas," interrupted another voice.

"Don't let's judge 'im too hard. Wait till to-morrow's out. It's not too late."

"Seed him goin' over by the cleave afore sun-down," observed another parishioner. "'E looked queer. White an' mazed-like, an' all see-saw in th' manner o' takin' th' road. 'E was talkin' to hisself too."

"Sayin' off his sermon, per'aps?"

"Didn't sound much like a sermon. 'Ere, landlord, glasses round, us be goin' to sing one o' th' ould songs. Uncle Biddlelake there, he'm brought 'is concertina. 'Twill liven us up a bit."

Song followed song, and glasses were filled and emptied. Outside the wind blew over a white world, and a pale moon shone over heaped snow-drifts, and the twisting track of the road. It was

late, almost midnight, when a little car came slowly over that track, its lights flashing right and left where the heaped snow had been cleared by the passage of carts, or foot passengers. It ran on through the village street, and across the common, and drew up before a house in which a single light shone through a crimson blind.

The blind was raised as the faint hoot of warning sounded. A moment later the door opened, showing a slender figure outlined against the darkness of the entrance hall. The driver of the car helped his companion to alight. A huddled figure muffled in coat and cap, half supported by the arm on which he leant.

The girl in the doorway gave a sudden cry of astonishment. "Aubrey—what's happened?"

"I've brought—your husband—home. Is there any one else up beside yourself?"

"No." The white face looked unutterably weary. She stepped back, listening to the lagging step, as if it were no new thing.

"The usual state, I suppose? But where did you find him?"

"Near the Clapper Bridge. Steady now, you're all right. You're safe—*home*. Try and get that into your head. Home."

Startled by the tone of his voice, which conveyed a deeper meaning than the mere words, Renée turned and looked at the speaker, and then at the figure sinking so wearily into the chair by the fire. Aubrey Derringham had piloted him there, and

now stood looking from his face to that piteous ashamed one of the young wife.

"You're sure—you're alone? There's no one else?" he said in a hoarse whisper.

"Quite sure. This is no new experience for me."

"My poor child!"

Involuntarily he put out his hands and took hers into their warm protecting clasp. "My brave little Renée! Now sit down, there. I've got to tell you something that will need all your courage." He glanced round. "Have you any wine, at hand?"

"Not more—for him?" she gasped protestingly.

"No, for yourself. Ah—I see!"

He went to the door and closed it. Then opened the sideboard, and took out a decanter. Glasses stood on the shelf. He brought one over, and filled it, and gave it to her.

"Don't be afraid. You'll need all your strength. Now—*look*."

She followed the gesture of his hand. Saw the figure lift its head, take off the tweed cap. Saw the close curling hair, the clear-cut face, the round clerical collar. Saw in a sudden flash of terror they were not George Gale's features but Geoffrey's.

Geoffrey's face, Geoffrey's eyes, looking at her from the dress and living presentment of his brother.

CHAPTER XIX

"MORE LIVES THAN ONE"

SPEECHLESS and bewildered the girl looked from one to the other. Her trembling lips could frame no words in that first shock of surprise.

Aubrey went to the door, looked out, then shut it firmly, and came back. "Now listen," he said. "Whatever you may *think*, or feel, or suspect, this is George Gale—your husband."

"No, no!" she cried wildly. "That's not true."

"For you—no. For the world—yes. Renée, fate has played a strange trick upon us. Nothing so strange, so impossible, could ever have been brought about except by the accident that has brought it. Even I, even Chaffey wouldn't have dared do what—such an accident has done, and we've been pretty daring as you know. . . ."

He paused, glancing from her white face to that other, scarcely less white or strained in its attention.

"Two hours ago," he went on hurriedly, "Chaffey came in from an errand. On his way back he stumbled across a figure lying in the roadway. There was light enough to see the face, light enough to recognize George Gale—your husband."

"George—then he——"

A sense of mystery, of dread, was weighing on her heart. She could not voice what this discovery meant, or involved.

"He was—dead," said Aubrey gravely.

"Dead——"

"He may have struck his head against some rough stones that the snow had hidden, or succumbed to the cold. We don't know. Only Chaffey put him gently to one side, and rushed to me to tell me of the discovery, and of what it meant."

The white lips shook, but no words escaped. Her heart told her what it had meant. What wild project had been framed and carried through in a moment's mad impulse. The changed identity safeguarded by an extraordinary resemblance; the transference of the living for the dead, the dead for the living.

She rose, and stood leaning against the table. "I think—I know," she stammered. "George is dead. Geoffrey is to take his place, and yet—how?"

"Do you realize what it means, Renée? Safety for life. *For life*. No need for flight, for subterfuge. No possibility of suspicion. Chaffey did his work thoroughly. The prison clothes had never been destroyed."

She made a hurried gesture. She saw in a flash the whole scheme, the extraordinary deception to which they were all committed, but in her heart

she only cried: "It is just. It is just!" Just—that the real sinner should suffer in some measure for his sin. Just—that the martyred life should know itself rehabilitated, set in safety and honour once again.

In honour? Could it be that? Could it ever be *that*? It was Geoffrey's turn to speak now. He rose and steadied himself against the table, looking eagerly at the girl's lowered eyes.

"Do me justice, Renée," he said. "Believe me I was not told of this, not of the danger or the magnitude of the scheme till we were on our way here! Even now I won't consent to it unless you—wish it."

"I *must* wish it!" she cried passionately. "It is the only way out of our difficulty. Not a soul will know. You—almost deceived me. In that dress you can pass for George—anywhere. I doubt if even father would recognize you."

"But, Renée, have you thought what it means to—you?"

The colour mounted slowly to the haggard young face. No, she had not thought of that. Had not remembered that change of identity meant also change of relationship. That if Geoffrey Gale lived here as George Gale, he must live here as her husband.

White as death she turned to Aubrey Derringham. "How—can we?"

"It rests between you both," he said.

"Between us." Her eyes turned to Geoffrey's.

For a moment their sad entreaty held her powerless. She was conscious of the ticking of the clock, of the fall of the ashes in the grate, of the dull heavy throbs of her heart.

George was dead—she was free. George lived again—she was bound to a yet heavier bondage. Over and over she said this to herself. Life seemed a stupid aimless thing in which human beings were caught in traps of steel, and told to move and live as if the trap did not exist. She had felt the trap close on her once; open, as if for freedom, then it snapped closer than ever, leaving her maimed, and tortured, and despairing.

Had she ever been a child? Ever romped with and teased these two boys, who had become her tyrants? Ever run races with them in cowslip meadows, and laughed for joy of a spring morning?

She was bound to the living and the dead. The joy of life was gone.

And how old she seemed . . . how old!

"Sit down, Geoffrey," she said suddenly. "I've thought it out. I'll do it."

She turned to Aubrey Derringham. "It's being so unprepared that—upset me," she stammered. "What's the use of pretending I'm sorry for—him. I hated him, and he knew it. My life here has been intolerable. Today even, in church, he was abusing me, because I wanted to make it a little like Christmas. And then he sat there, drinking himself into semi-stupor, until he went

out—" She shuddered. "Went out to his death. But that ends everything. It's of you I must think, Geoffrey—you How can you take his place—publicly?"

"I never thought of *that*—" faltered the boy.

No more had Aubrey thought of it. He did now and realized that the pass between Scylla and Charybdis was no fable. "You told me no one ever came to the church? That the service was a mere farce conducted for a deaf sexton and empty benches?"

"So it is. But sometimes a straggler from the parish drops in, and there are burials—and christenings," she added, flushing suddenly.

"We must only hope there won't be any while Geoffrey's here," said Derringham. "He can resign the curacy, you know. His health would be excuse enough, and that the place didn't agree with him, or you. That difficulty is not insurmountable. What we have to do is to throw dust in the eyes of the Princetown officials, so as to preclude all future suspicions. This seemed to me the one and only way. Of course Geoffrey must not leave too suddenly. But in a few months the story will be forgotten, and he won't be the first man in Holy Orders who resigns his office. What I wish to impress upon you both is that the *future* is now clear. That no one will ever be able to throw this convict episode in Geoffrey's face. It's over, and will be buried with the man they must find soon or late in that snow drift. The fact of

his hair having grown will be attributed to the length of time since the escape. If there's a *post mortem* it will be held in the prison. Nothing can be found out. No one will know that the Reverend George Gale of Shapsdown was the brother of No. 96. No one need ever know—now."

Renée looked at No. 96. At the despairing eyes, the unsteady hands and lips. The whole story of physical prostration and disordered nerves spoke in every line of the altered face, and the nerveless figure. Would he ever have strength to carry this through? To masquerade his whole life long as the brother who had wronged him, and now was paying the price of such wrong?

"It is getting late," said Aubrey suddenly. "And I have to make my way back over that awful road. You must arrange all this between you. Only, for God's sake, remember that you're *not* Geoffrey; that Renée mustn't call you Geoffrey, ever again."

"I'll remember," said the girl. She threw back her head, and looked from one to the other. "It's been all my doing. I must fight it out. I want you to go . . . right away—*now*, Mr. Derringham. I never thought of the harm I was doing you; of the risks you ran! But—I'm not a foolish girl any longer. I seem to have awakened to the purpose of life. . . . I'll think it all out—for myself, and for—George."

Aubrey started. That word seemed to set the seal of conclusion on the whole matter.

This was George Gale, and she, Renée, was his wife—to the world, and he was to go away, right away, as she had said, and leave her to fight out the battle for herself, and the man he had saved.

"I . . . I can't go—away, till I see how it works," he said hurriedly. "There will be a hundred things to guard against, and arrange. George's habits, his handwriting, his friends. How is Geoffrey to know all about these?"

"It sounds more difficult than we thought, at first," said the boy. "For one thing I can't play drunken wastrel in the village, even if I've the courage to face an empty church from the altar."

"No, I don't wish you to do that," said Aubrey. "You must take your chance of a sudden reformation. Renée will be seen with you more frequently. The gossips here can draw their own conclusions."

"And what about the servants?"

"We've only one," said Renée, "and a silly half-witted boy for the garden. Ann Whyddon is a stupid girl, and she was always frightened of George. You needn't take any notice of her."

"I must remember her name."

"It's an easy one," said Aubrey, turning up his coat collar, as he moved to the door. "Well, you get off to bed now, and don't worry over problems that may solve themselves. I'll come round tomorrow, and settle up the remaining details. No, Renée, don't come out in the cold. This isn't good-bye—yet."

She looked after him as he went into the hall,

her face white and strained and eager. "If it was," she said in her heart, "it might make *this* easier for me."

Then she turned to the waiting figure. "I'll show you your room. The house is very small. You won't lose your way."

"What about the morning?" he said, as he lit the candle she offered him.

"Breakfast is at nine o'clock. Ann will call you."

They looked at each other. She was calm enough. It was Geoffrey who was conscious of deeper meanings; tragic possibilities; things far removed from the brother and sister days in the Manchester home. Well, he had made his bargain with Fate. He must pay for it sooner or later.

Renée turned out the light in the sitting-room, and led the way upstairs. On the narrow landing two doors faced each other. She pointed to one.

"Mine?"

"Yes."

"That's—how it's been?"

"Yes."

"I only ask because of the servant. Where does she sleep?"

"Above; there are two attics, that's the extent."

"And she'll knock—here?"

The girl nodded. "You'll find everything you want. Of course it's not as comfortable as Mr. Derringham's, but you'll have to put up with it."

"About the service? There isn't an early one, I hope?"

"No, nothing till eleven o'clock."

"I hope to God," he said, "I can get through! Shall I have to read a sermon?"

"No, there won't be anyone to listen. Even on a Sunday there isn't. And the people don't approve of making Christmas day into that."

"Christmas day," he muttered. "It's that, Renée. A strange one for us."

"Good-night," she said, and opened her door to fall in tearless misery on widowed pillows, and wonder why she had so entangled herself in the meshes of life's perplexities.

If she had not interfered? If Geoffrey had been left to work out his sentence, and be released in the ordinary way? If——

But why pursue the subject? It was done. Nothing could undo it. George Gale slept beneath the cold shroud of the snows, and Geoffrey—slept across that narrow space of landing which had meant divided hearts, and now divided lives.

The stage was set and the play began.

The servant suspected nothing. What was there to suspect? Master and mistress facing each other at the breakfast table. Master's face very pallid, his hand a little shaky as he took his cup. Very little conversation while she was in the room. Afterwards, when they were left alone, Geoffrey was the more embarrassed. Renée for all her

pallor, and tense nerves, had accepted the situation and played up to it.

"I'll go to the church with you. I'll sit in the usual place. You know what to do, I suppose?"

"Read the morning service, and—must there be a sermon?"

She rose, and went to a bookshelf by the fireplace. "There are plenty here," she said. "All sorts, and lengths. You'll have to look up one for Christmas day."

"What—afterwards?"

"Nothing, I suppose. I don't know if we ought to call on the Rector. You see this is my first Christmas here."

"But oughtn't I to visit the parishioners, give them tea and sugar and things?"

"I did that, yesterday," she said. "That's how I spent my Christmas eve."

He breathed a sigh of relief. "The Rector won't be likely to notice any difference?"

"Not he. He's half blind and half witted. Besides, I'll go there with you."

"And, for the rest, for the other days and duties, you'll tell me, won't you, Renée?"

"Of course. Oh, my dear, it will be easy enough. Too easy I almost think."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean that where there seems no obstacle, or impediment, one is almost afraid that Fate's lying in wait to play some trick. Could anything be imagined so strange and yet so easy as this?"

Geoffrey pushed aside his cup, and leant his head on his hands.

"I shall feel easier," he said, "when they've found—him."

The girl's face flushed, then grew deadly white. "So shall I. Oh, Geoffrey, was there anything, any mark, scar, something making a difference between you? Your hands?"

He turned them palm upwards. The nails had grown and been trimmed. They were to be George Gale's hands, but what of Geoffrey's?

"Whatever they notice," he said, "they'll not say anything. We're stripped, and searched, and described, and it's all put down in a book, but what answers for me will answer for him. The prison clothes would be enough, and the colour of hair, shape of features, height, they're exactly the same. I'm not afraid of there being any doubt, though I don't fancy facing any of those fellows myself."

"You needn't. There's no one likely to come here, and there's no necessity for you to go to Princetown. George never did."

She rose. "He used to sit in that chair and smoke after breakfast, or potter round the garden. But that's impossible now, owing to the snow. You'd better look out that sermon, Geoffrey, in case of accidents."

"You're not to call me Geoffrey."

"I forgot. That's the hardest part. I hate to have to give you his name."

"When once we can go away from here, you needn't."

"No!" she cried eagerly. "That will alter everything. You can be yourself, and I——"

She paused. Their eyes met. "I forgot. If you are to pass as George, I—I must pass as your wife?"

"Unless we go away somewhere where we're not known."

"But that will mean money. You—you haven't any, Geoffrey, and I—so little."

"I must go through the farce of resigning Holy Orders, as Mr. Derringham said. Then I'll work, do something that will make money. Mr. Derringham has promised to help me."

"What about father? If you give up being a clergyman he won't be pleased. You'll have to see him and explain your reasons."

"I could write, or—or you might tell him I was—changed, Renée. Anyway, that's for the future. We needn't trouble about it yet. When shall you be ready for church?"

"In half an hour. You're quite safe in recognizing any one in the village. They're all your parishioners, only they don't attend the services."

But whether it was the result of the Christmas gifts, or from sudden desire to hear a Christmas sermon, there were quite a dozen people as congregation; mostly women, and two very ancient men, whose wives had persuaded an attendance that might possibly mean more bounties.

It was a shock to Renée, and a surprise. But when the white-robed figure came out of the vestry, and stood in the appointed place, she held her breath for sheer amazement. It might have been George in the life. George as she had seen him scores of times. George as he had stood and looked at the empty aisles, and the untenanted seats, and gabbled over excerpts of the service with stolid indifference.

Geoffrey was nervous, but not perceptibly so. He made mistakes but no one was able to criticize them. He read out a brief sermon of safe platitudes, as the prison chaplain had so often done, and then he dismissed them all with a novel blessing that bade them enjoy the day each in their respective fashion. They shuffled out of the cold, dreary edifice and loitered about the churchyard in hopes of an odd shilling or sixpence. Renée had provided Geoffrey with small change and he dispensed it nervously as he hurried down the path. He could not address them by name, but they were too engrossed in their Christmas boxes to notice the omission.

He breathed a sigh of thankfulness as the last curtesy was dropped and the last "thank 'ee, sir," sounded. The first ordeal was over. He felt more self-confident. He could face facts more steadily, and in this frame of mind he accompanied Renée to the old Rectory.

CHAPTER XX

“THE MEMORY OF DREADFUL THINGS”

WHATEVER there was of gloom, or shabbiness, or dust seemed to have gathered about and inside the queer old tumble-down place called Shapsdown Rectory. Its owner, as revealed to Geoffrey Gale's astonished eyes, was a blear-eyed, bald old man of some fourscore and odd years. So many of those years had been spent in this desolate moorland hamlet that he had lost all touch with the outer world. He lived alone, with no relative, only an old housekeeper to look after his needs, and take charge of the house, such as it was.

She showed Renée and Geoffrey into the one living-room, where the reverend gentleman sat crouched over the fire, sipping weak whiskey and water into which he occasionally dipped a mouldy-looking biscuit. This was his luncheon.

He looked up as the door opened, and blinked his eyes, and muttered some sort of greeting.

Geoffrey went up and held out his hand, but the old man was too occupied with his glass and his biscuit to notice it.

“Service over? Any one there today?” he asked.

"Yes," said Renée. "Quite a dozen people including myself."

"A dozen! Never. . . . Lord above! You're waking them up, Mr. Gale. I said you were too young. Young men are too zealous. They believe what they preach. I did—once."

His harsh laugh was as disconcerting as the grating of a key in a rusty lock.

"Sit down," he went on. "Have some whiskey. It's Christmas day isn't it?"

"Yes," said Geoffrey. "But I don't want anything, so early."

"Early? Why, you've had your glass at ten o'clock! It's the first time you think it too early. . . . Ah, your wife's here! She keeps you in order. That's right. Do what she tells you. . . . Pretty chick!"

He grinned and nodded at Renée, who turned aside with an expression of disgust.

"So they came to church . . . and didn't stone you, eh? They used to throw bricks at me—once. Pleasant brutes! Oh—we loved each other, I assure you!"

Again he laughed, and nodded, and spluttered. Geoffrey thought it was surely by some oversight of "those in authority" that such a wreck of decency should usurp the office of a dignitary of the church. He glanced appealingly at Renée. She rose.

"We just came in to wish you—the usual Christmas wishes, Mr. Ramsdown," she said, and put

her chair back in its place against the patched and faded wall paper.

"Yes . . . yes . . . very kind. I'm an old man, my dear, no one remembers me. All dead and gone, everyone I knew, dead and gone. . . . I'll soon be joining them. . . . You're going home? Ah . . . Christmas dinner, and plum pudding, and sitting over the fire, cracking nuts, drinking good old port. . . . Lucky folk. If I were ten years younger I'd have joined you. I used to have my Christmas dinner with the other man. . . . He was old too. . . . He could tell a good story though, over the port, and the fire. Well, well, everything has an end. . . . Good-bye then. Take care of the pretty chick. . . this isn't the sort of roost for her. . . . Mind she doesn't spread her wings and fly away. She wouldn't be the first. . . . I know . . . I know. . . ."

To the sound of his harsh chuckles they closed the door and went out into the cold fresh air with a sense of relief. As they moved over the frozen snow they caught the sound of a motor horn. Renée started.

"Aubrey—Mr. Derringham! Oh, I'm so glad! He will have dinner with us. I wondered—I hope he's brought Chaffey too. He's such a dear! He'll be company for Ann."

Geoffrey's voice was a reminder. "Ann? You forget *he's* not the chauffeur to her!"

"So I did. Well, he can dine with us. You won't mind?"

"Have I the right to mind anything? What am I now but a passive agent, in the hands of you all?"

They hurried on and reached the house. The little Renault was standing before the gate. Chaffey held the wheel.

Renée's face made enquiry as she ran up.

"Mr. Darrell's inside, ma'am—waiting."

He had accustomed himself to call Aubrey that. Even now he glanced round to see if there were inquisitive loiterers to hear it. Then he looked at Geoffrey.

"You must come in too!" exclaimed Renée. "You're to have your Christmas dinner with us. I insist on it. It's to be ready by two o'clock, Ann promised. Then she's to go out for the rest of the day. We—" she stopped abruptly.

"Perhaps you'll ask Mr. Darrell about it?" said Chaffey. "Where's the car to go?"

"Can't it stay—there?"

"Yes, of course. But the sky looks threatening. There'll be snow before night, and the road is something awful."

His eyes shifted restlessly from Geoffrey's face to Geoffrey's figure. They expressed surprise as well as admiration for an achievement. Who, in Princetown, or Dartmoor, would ever associate that wasted desperate looking No. 96 with this handsome well dressed cleric. And who, who had ever seen George Gale, would believe this was not that person?

"And I did it all!" he thought complacently. "A stroke of genius, that's what it was. Lord! if they only knew up there how they'd been tricked!"

It was a strange meal, that Christmas dinner to which they all sat down. Renée the pale and anxious hostess; Geoffrey masquerading as master of the ceremony. Chaffey assuming the rôle of genial friend. Aubrey Derringham stern and perplexed and painfully nervous now that the machinery had been set in motion, and results had to be ascertained.

Ann Whyddon thought it a very stiff, unfriendly sort of party. No one seemed to have any appetite for boiled turkey and its accompaniments; and the plum pudding, laboriously manufactured during the past anxious weeks, refused to take fire, or stand up, or represent anything that a moral, well-brought-up pudding should have represented. When she had removed the plates and the cloth, and set nuts and apples on the table, flanked by a decanter of the port wine that the old Rector had sent, Renée told her she might go home, and take the rest of the pudding with her.

"Don't wait to wash up," she added. "It will do when you come back."

The girl gasped. This was a proper sort of "missus." One whose praises might well be sung to less favoured contemporaries.

She lost no time in availing herself of the permis-

sion. They heard the door slam before ten minutes were over their heads.

Then Chaffey rose. "Begging your pardon, ma'am, and you, sir, I'll retire now. I know you want to talk things over."

Aubrey nodded. The door of the room closed, and Geoffrey got up and stirred the fire; they drew their chairs closer around it.

"So far all has gone well," he said. "But I don't mind telling you that it's a strain."

"You must have patience," said Aubrey. "It would look strange if you left here very suddenly."

"I wouldn't mind if I hadn't to play at wolf in sheep's clothing," said the boy bitterly. "I'm not what you call religious, never was. But I hated standing in that church this morning, dressed in that surplice, reading out those—prayers. And as luck would have it some people did come."

"You did it very well," said Renée."

"My prison experiences stood to me," he said in the same bitter tone. "I used to wonder what the chaplain felt. What he really thought was the good of it."

"Don't you think it was any good?" Aubrey asked.

"No, not a bit. Some took to canting by way of currying favour, but most of us felt more inclined to follow Job's example—'Curse God and die'—than bless his name, or ask his pardon. When life is poisoned, and day for day means only hardship

and despair, you're not exactly in tune with spiritual things! By the way, Renée, you've no music in the church. What's happened to the organ?"

"It's no use at all. There's a wheezy old harmonium. I used to play it at first but—he, we thought it made matters worse."

"I'd like to do something, if I could," he said, "just to, well, to know that I had done something. I want to have no time to *think*! Let me have every day, every hour, filled up, if you can."

Renée cowered down into her chair, and covered her face with her hands. That was how he felt, and how she felt. Both their lives darkened and perplexed. So much to forget; so little to do; and everything to fear.

Aubrey Derringham glanced at the bent head, and his heart ached for the girl. If he could have helped to avert this catastrophe he would have made any sacrifice, but it had been already too late to do anything when Chaffey had staggered into the house carrying in his arms those clothes George Gale had worn. In the excitement of the project all sight of future difficulties had lapsed into present hopefulness. So little had been said at the moment. So much taken for granted.

Aubrey had not even known that Chaffey's daring had not been exhausted by his first action. Had not guessed that not only was the clerical dress removed, but replaced by that of the escaped convict. The man had had the courage to do this

thing, and having done it, the consequences had to be endured.

In cool blood Aubrey Derringham recognized the danger as well as the frightful liabilities to which he was pledged. He and Renée. Would she have the strength to go through with it? To live on here with the man who was not her husband and yet who loved her? *That* secret he had quickly discovered.

Today, seeing them playing a part that held all the intimacy and commonplace interests of married life, he was appalled by the difficulties before them. For a time, while danger threatened, while they had to remain in this moorland district, they might play their respective parts—but afterwards—what complications would have to be faced?

Renée lifted her head suddenly. "There's one way out of it," she faltered. "Couldn't I go home to father? At least for a time? I'm no use here; no one will miss me, and Geoffrey will be quite safe. No one suspects."

Geoffrey looked at her, read the fear, the agony, the suffering of the young haggard face. Saw too that it was to Aubrey she turned, to Aubrey she appealed.

"It's a good idea," he said harshly. "I'll be better alone."

"You can have the car," said Renée eagerly. "Chaffey would show you how to drive it. And then, perhaps in a month, or two, you could write and say you were giving up this curacy——"

“And the priestly humbug?” he added. “But I’ll have to keep clear of Manchester, Renée. I daren’t face your father. Somehow, I think he’s the only one who would see that the ‘clothes are the clothes of Esau, but the hands are—Jacob’s.’”

Aubrey Derringham rose. “I agree with Renée. It is the best plan. We have no right to tax her with daily subterfuge; a daily struggle. Besides, to quote Stevenson—‘there’s a decency to be observed.’ To all intents and purposes she is a widow, in the first days of her loss. We seem to have lost sight of that fact in our eagerness to reinstate you, Geoffrey.”

He paced the room slowly; his brows knit, his eyes on the carpet. Certainly this was the best plan, that Renée should go home for a time, and Geoffrey remain here. Once that—discovery—was made, once the snow drift gave up its secret, he would be safe. Then he could slip out of George Gale’s shoes as far as the ministry was concerned. He came back to the fire, and lit a cigarette, and offered his case to Geoffrey. They sat there silently for a few moments, each busy with their own thoughts. A knock at the door and the entrance of Chaffey disturbed them. He held some letters in his hand.

“Post just come,” he announced. “Morning’s delivery—Christmas time!”

He put the letters on the table, and Renée rose and looked them over. Two for George; one for

her. As she saw the writing, she started. Then tore it open and read the brief lines.

She turned to Geoffrey. "From father! He's coming *here!* To spend Christmas—a little surprise. . . ." The letter fell from her shaking hand. "He's—at Princetown, on the way. Oh, Geoffrey!"

Aubrey picked up the letter. He too had grown very pale.

It was an affectionate reminder that Andrew Jessop was desirous to see his dear son and daughter, and escape the loneliness of a Christmas fireside. He would be with them either on Christmas eve, or Christmas day. No need to meet him. He'd make his way over the moor and drop in as a "pleasant surprise."

"Pleasant surprise!" Aubrey echoed the words and glanced at the two who were to be surprised so pleasantly. Here was a complication to be faced.

Geoffrey sprang to his feet. "He's not come—yet. But he's on his way. Renée, what's to be done?"

She lifted her white face. "We've got to go through with it. . . . He'll have to stay here. . . . Perhaps it will only be a few days, Geoffrey. You'll——"

"For God's sake don't call me *that!*" he said. "Try and remember who I am now."

"The room?" she faltered. "Yours——"

"I must give it up?"

"Yes, there's no other."

"What about the attics?"

"They're not furnished. At least only Ann's."

"Let her sleep at home," said Aubrey. "She won't mind; it's in the village."

"Yes, that would do," said Geoffrey quickly. "We must play up to the situation now. We're in a tight place, but I promise I'll do my best, Renée, for your sake."

"For her sake you must," said Aubrey. "This is a thing we couldn't have expected, or prepared against. And he must be on his way. He might be here at any moment. What's the date of the postmark?"

Geoffrey picked up the envelope. "December twenty-fourth. He was at Princetown yesterday. I wonder why he didn't come on?"

They looked at one another. The same thought flashed to each mind. Had Jessop stayed on to visit the prison, to interview those in authority as to the escape of that unfortunate No. 96?

Renée sprang up impulsively. "Wheels! I hear them! Oh, Aubrey, stay—help us! We . . . I don't know how to face this!"

He took her hands, and held them tightly. "I'll stay, of course. But you must control yourself. You can't break down *now*. You mustn't."

"And, after all, it needn't alter your plan," said Geoffrey. "You can say you want a change—that it's too bleak for you up here—and then go back with him."

A loud knock at the door warned them of an arrival.

"I'll go," said Renée desperately. "Keep there Geof—George, in the shadow. The fire's low. If we get through the first few minutes we're all right."

They heard the stir and bustle in the hall. The dumping down of a portmanteau; the grumbling of the driver, who had brought the unwelcome visitor, and evidently expected a larger tip than one that doubled his ordinary fare.

Then someone came in, and Geoffrey rose.

"Uncle——"

"My dear boy!" His hands were seized, the voice was strangely agitated. "My dear George, a word with you alone! I've had a shock. . . . I'm terribly upset! Send Renée away. I must speak to you!"

Aubrey came up. "I'll take Mrs. Gale into the next room, shall I?"

Andrew Jessop peered at him in the dusk of the waning firelight.

"Who is this? A friend of yours, George?"

"Mr. Darrell, a neighbour. My uncle, Mr. Darrell."

"Say father, my boy; I'm that now, you know. Well, just a moment, Mr.—ah—Darrell. Get Renée away. I want a word with George."

Aubrey seized the opportunity. Renée was just entering; he stopped her.

"Come into the kitchen for a moment," he whispered.

“What’s happened?”

“I don’t know. He wants to speak to Geoffrey.”

“Geoffrey—again! Shall we ever remember? Oh—I wonder what it is? Something dreadful I’m sure. He looked so strange. He hardly seemed to see me. And the first thing he said was, ‘Where’s George? I must speak to George!’”

CHAPTER XXI

“HE—IS AT PEACE”

GEOFFREY GALE dragged forward a chair, keeping his face well in the shadow.

“Sit down, uncle. What’s happened to upset you?”

The old man was trembling greatly. Geoffrey poured out a glass of wine, and gave it him.

“It’s port, good old stuff. Drink it up, and then tell me.”

“Ah, my boy, that’s like you—always thoughtful.”

He gulped down the wine, and set the glass on the table.

“George,” he said solemnly, “they’ve found—him.”

“Who?” faltered Geoffrey.

“Your brother. It appears word came to the prison this morning of a—a body, found in the snow, somewhere on the moor. I—I drove with them, George. I had a presentiment. . . . We found him—frozen—dead, half hidden by the snow, in the prison clothes. It was a shock. Yes, I confess that. He was so changed . . . it

was awful! Well, well, that's the end of it and his mad idea of escape. I was planning something for his future, George. I was learning to forgive. . . . I was trying to believe he'd been tempted, led astray, in one of those hours when he wasn't himself. In those long solitary months, my boy, I've tried to think things over calmly. I—had succeeded, in a way. And when I went over that place yesterday, and saw the faces, heard some of the stories—well, George, I . . . I broke down. I confess it. I wished I hadn't been so hard. I wished I'd let him off. Who knows—it might have been a lesson? Well, it's too late now, poor lad; it's too late. His eyes were wide open, George. They seemed to accuse me. And that hateful dress, and his pinched blue face, and—once you and he had played in my garden, with my own little child . . . happy, innocent . . . God have mercy on me, George, if I've been too harsh! Do you ever blame me in your heart?"

Did—he—ever blame him? All the bitterness of those past months of savage endurance swept like a storm over Geoffrey's tense nerves.

"I do blame you—everyone! All the fools who judged and condemned and sent a living soul to hell!"

"George—you forget you yourself condemned! You were as bitter as I was."

The boy checked himself, and remembered the change of parts that necessitated a change of moral nature.

"I know," he muttered. "But perhaps I've changed too."

"You never went there, George, to see him?"

"Never."

"Nor I. Now it seems as if the hand of God was in it. That I should have come *here*, that I should be crossing that awful moor where he met his death, and there—face him again."

Suddenly he bent his head on his hands, his shoulders shaking in a sudden storm of weeping.

"There's Renée," he said at last. "She'll have to be told. What a melancholy Christmas time . . . and I've not seen—you or her—since your wedding day."

Geoffrey was silent. What could he say?

"I suppose she's heard of the escape?" the old man went on. "They notified me. But I didn't write. Being so near I felt sure you'd hear of it. At first I thought he might have come to you for safety. But there, of course, you couldn't do it. The risk was too great. Yet it wasn't so very far from here we found him, George."

"We—yes, we heard."

"It's four weeks since he got away. I wonder what he'd been doing all that time? How could he have got food, or kept hidden—in those clothes?"

"The moor has strange hiding places," said Geoffrey. "And someone may have taken pity on him. We're not all police spies."

The old man looked up eagerly. Even in the

dusk he could see how moved and fierce that young face was. "You—you have forgiven him, George. You'd have taken pity, wouldn't you?"

"I—I think so."

"And Renée? She always said he was innocent. I wonder if she knew where he was hiding, if she helped? She has a motor car, hasn't she?"

"Only a little thing that holds two people."

"It occurred to me that—but no—it's a foolish idea. Still, as you said, George, someone must have played good Samaritan, and at what a risk."

"A terrible risk, as you say, uncle."

His voice was hard and harsh with the supreme effort to keep all emotion out of it; for despite himself, his sufferings, his just anger with those to whom he owed these sufferings, he could not forget that the dead man in the snow had been his brother, bound to him by an even closer bond than ordinary brotherhood. And now, they would never touch hands, nor speak forgiveness. Between their two lives yawned the grim depths of a prison grave.

Suddenly he seized the old man's hand. "Oh, can't we spare him *that!*" he cried hoarsely. "At least claim him; give him Christian burial, a decent resting place?"

"I asked them," faltered the old man. "I thought of that too, George, but they only said it couldn't be done. He hadn't served his sentence; he'd incurred fresh penalties by that escape."

"This is a Christian land," said Geoffrey bitterly. "One must expect such mercies as these as evidence of Christianity."

"It's very hard. . . . I know what you must feel, my boy. If even you had had the consolation of reading the last offices over a simple grave, in some quiet corner, here—but that's denied us. He's gone out of our lives for ever, God rest his soul."

"Yes. . . . God rest his soul—if he deserves it," muttered Geoffrey, as he stooped to stir the dying fire.

"And now we've Renée to think of," said the old man. "She must be told. There's no help for it, is there?"

Geoffrey sprang at the suggestion. "She's far from well. It will be a great shock. I've been thinking, uncle, of sending her away for a time, for change. It's so cold and desolate here. Your arrival has put the idea into my head that she might go back with you. I'm sure it would do her good."

"My dear boy, I'd be only too delighted. But what about yourself? Can you spare her? I thought a clergyman's wife was as necessary to the parish as himself?"

"So she is, but I mustn't sacrifice Renée's health to personal considerations and the parish. No, no, she sadly needs a change. Take her back to Manchester with you. She wants to go, I know."

"George, my boy." The old man's voice was

troubled. "Tell me—is there anything wrong? Aren't you happy?"

"Of course—perfectly. Don't get that into your head; I mean don't fancy that we don't hit it off. It's nothing to do with *that*. It's the place . . . it's awful, uncle, you've no idea——"

"I formed an idea when I saw your surroundings. By the way, whose car was that at the door?"

"Mr. Der—Darrell's, that gentleman you saw. He's been dining with us."

"Does he live here?"

"No—o; only stays occasionally, with a friend, who has a house near Two Bridges."

"He looked a nice, well set up sort of chap. By the way, where is he, and Renée?"

"You said you wanted to speak to me alone."

"So I did, but call her in now, my boy. I want to see her. See how happy she looks, and how she fits the post of clergyman's wife. Call her in."

"What about telling her—this?"

"Ah—true, true! Suppose we keep it to ourselves, just for to-day, my boy. No need to sadden her . . . your first Christmas together too as man and wife. No, we'll keep it to ourselves, as I said before. Oh—I do hope you've got a spare room? I gave very short notice, didn't I?"

"Oh! that's all right," said Geoffrey. "We have a room. I'll call Renée, and get a lamp. Our maid has gone off to her own people. You must excuse any shortcomings."

He hastened away. He wondered what he

should say to Renée? How explain this long conversation?

They were standing in a group before the kitchen fire. She, and Aubrey Derringham, and Chaffey. In each face he read a question that he felt his own answered.

"They've found him?" gasped Renée. "I knew it."

Geoffrey said nothing. He saw the lamp standing on a side table, and went up to it and lit it.

"Your father wants you, Renée," he said hoarsely. "You're not to know of this till tomorrow. He doesn't want to spoil our first Christmas—together."

Her eyes turned from one face to the other. "Geoffrey, Aubrey—oh—I can't go through any more! *I can't!*"

She threw herself into a chair. She was shaking from head to foot. The great tears rolled unchecked down her piteous face.

Aubrey turned to Geoffrey. "It's no use," he said. "She's gone through too much. You'll have to say she guessed—what's happened. Let her go to her room, and leave her to herself for a while."

The girl staggered to her feet. "Yes, yes, let me go, let me be alone! Aubrey—help me!"

He drew back from the outstretched hand; from the shaking figure.

"It's your duty," he said to the white-faced boy. "Take her to her room. I'll explain to her father."

And Geoffrey Gale put his arm round the trembling girl and led her away.

Andrew Jessop accepted explanations, and accepted Aubrey Derringham also as a friend of the family, and someone keenly interested in both his nephews. They sat by the fire talking and smoking together, while Geoffrey ministered to the poor distraught girl above stairs, and Chaffey wondered how they were going to get home? For a sudden thaw had set in, and sleet and hail were beating against the window panes, in a manner that promised slushy roads and a perilous journey.

Disliking idleness, he made up the fire, and put on the kettle, and got out the tea things. In Ann's absence he deemed it as well to perform her duties. Besides the old gentleman had had a long cold drive, and Renée might like a cup of tea, when her hysterical fit was over.

"Poor girl, she's gone through a lot, I must say," he told himself. "And after all he *was* her husband."

To Geoffrey's amazement, he found tea made and set out on a tray, when he came downstairs. He carried it into the dining-room, with an excuse for Renée's absence.

"She's quieter now. She thinks she can sleep. I'm sure, uncle, you won't mind if she doesn't come down tonight. This has been a trying time for—for us all."

"I'm sure it has. Mr. Darrell here has been

explaining about the search parties, and the excitement everywhere. Ah, my dear boy, how welcome that tea is. I see you're quite a domestic character now."

Geoffrey was thankful for Aubrey Derringham's presence, for his tact and energy, and the skill with which he directed the old man's attention from painful or personal matters. Suddenly the idea of a room to be prepared occurred to him. It must be his own room, and the old man must not know it. He had decided to sleep on the couch in the dining-room, but there were details and he worried over them. Clean sheets and towels, a fire to be lit, and he knew nothing of linen cupboards, or wood house. He thought again of Chaffey and his character of "handy man."

He rose and put the tea things together. "I'll just see if the girl's come back," he said. "She must air your room, uncle. I wish we had known a little sooner, but you were here on the heels of your letter."

"I know, my boy, it's all my fault. But don't bother yourself. I'm quite comfortable here. I'll wait as long as you please."

So Geoffrey went back to the kitchen, and explained difficulties, and the invaluable Chaffey met and smoothed them away with the skill of an expert. He found the wood house and lit the fire, and discovered where the linen was and made the bed. He brought up the old gentleman's portmanteau, and made everything comfortable for him. He even tiptoed across to Renée's

room, where she slept the sleep of exhaustion, and saw that her fire was made up, and the lamp put where it would not hurt her eyes.

The question of the homeward journey recurred to his mind, as the rain beat against the windows with persistent animosity. "We might stop at the inn? I suppose they've got rooms?" he reflected. "I wonder if master would mind? I don't care to take the car over that road. It would have to swim, I'm thinking."

Aubrey was thinking the same. He saw no possibility of getting home through quagmires of mud and melting snow. He came out of the sitting-room to discuss the matter just as Chaffey came down the stairs.

"Been getting the old gent's room ready, sir," he whispered. "And she's asleep, poor soul. Best thing too. I'd have given her some hot port with chlorodyne in it, if I'd had my way."

"Your medical ambitions will be your ruin, Chaffey," said Aubrey, with a faint smile. "I want to know what we're going to do?"

"If I might suggest, sir, I'd say stay where we are."

"What—*here*?"

"Not exactly this house, sir. What about the inn? I thought I might run round and see if we could have a couple of rooms for the night. The car could be put up somewhere. I suppose they've a stable or a cow house?"

"I doubt it," said Aubrey. "And the inn is

only a beer house. Couldn't we get as far as Two Bridges?"

"I'll try, sir, but there's an awful bit of road when you get out of the village."

"Well, do your best; I leave it to you."

"Thank you, sir. Everything's shipshape here. I expect that girl, Ann Whyddon, will puzzle her head a bit. But the old gent will be all right, and so'll Mrs. Gale. I suppose Mr. Geof—I mean Mr. Gale, will give an eye to her, now and then. I haven't much faith in that Ann."

"I'll tell him," said Aubrey.

He was conscious of sudden weariness; of long strain, and repressed emotions.

"You look very tired, sir," said Chaffey. "This is getting a bit too much for you."

He came nearer, and lowered his voice. "It'll be all right now, sir, don't you worry. Right down providential I call it that the old gent should have been there to identify. No one will say a word, even if they thought—but why should they think? No one, sir, in the prison ever saw Mr. George. No one *here* ever saw Mr. Geoffrey. Only his uncle and ourselves know of the likeness. Today, sir, has finished it up. Believe me, we needn't fear. You see how easy Mr. Geoffrey has passed into his place, just as I said he would. Not a soul suspects, nor ever will—now."

"I hope to God you're right, Chaffey!" said Aubrey fervently. "Somehow I feel—afraid."

"Afraid of what, sir?"

"I don't know. That's just it. Perhaps it's of—Geoffrey Gale—himself."

"I don't understand, sir. Why, it's to his interest to keep up the——"

"The deception. You don't like the word, Chaffey, any more than I do. We've been playing a dangerous game. We can't stop playing, that's the worst of it, and we've dragged a woman into the business, and she—she has to go on too. You never thought of that, Chaffey?"

"Thought of—her, sir?"

"Yes, of her. If she loves Geoffrey, if he loves her—what then?"

"That would make it all the easier, sir, if it's the case. But I don't believe it is. I'm sure the young lady doesn't care for Mr. Geoffrey, except as the cousin he is."

"And she didn't care for George Gale, yet she married him. Do you understand that?"

"No, sir, I don't."

"We've driven her into a corner, Chaffey. We'd no right to do it. We should have thought—but there, I was wrong, I was a fool."

He passed to and fro the brick floor of the little kitchen.

In all this confusion, this clash of personalities, he was conscious only of a girl's helplessness. It was as if he saw her sinking into deep waters and could only stand on the bank watching her struggles, impotent, panic-stricken, as one bound by the horrors of nightmare.

“Come, come, sir, pull yourself together. What’s the good of looking at the worst side of things? I know it’s my fault. I took you by surprise, but I’m sure, sir, we’ll get through all right. Look how things are a playing up to us. Who’d ’a’ thought of Mr. Jessop turning up *here*. That’s the odd trick for us, sir, my word on it!”

CHAPTER XXII

“WHETHER LAWS BE RIGHT, OR WHETHER LAWS
BE WRONG ”

THEY secured rooms at the inn for the night, rough and queer, but endurable. Chaffey spent half an hour in the bar, and learnt many things concerned with the “young passon” and his wife. Geoffrey Gale had no enviable reputation to keep up judging from what was said of George. There was talk too of that discovery on the moor. The driver of old Jessop’s carriage had stopped to refresh his horses, and himself. Then, being weather-wise, and amply paid for his journey thither, he resolved to postpone departure till daylight. The news he brought was exciting enough to procure him “free drinks” for the sake of it.

The point at issue seemed that of where the young convict could have lain hidden, and where he could have procured food?

“Stole it, of course,” suggested Chaffey. “Ain’t there hens and eggs to be had, and wild rabbits? Heaps of ways to keep oneself alive.”

“But in the end, sir, he’s died o’ starvin’,” said the landlord of “The Poor John.” “He’d ha’

bided in his hidin' place but for want o' food, that be sure."

"Didn't seem as he look starved," observed the flyman from Princetown. "Not a scarce crow sort o' corpse, so to say. Han't yew missed things anywhere about 'ere?"

There was an immediate proclamation of strayed poultry, mysterious disappearance of bread. Even a joint or two from the local butcher's stall shared in the new glory of exploited thefts.

Chaffey felt he was being rewarded.

"What'll they do to un, now he'm captured?" enquired an eager voice.

"Can't ha' th' law on a dead corpse," said the landlord. "They'll let un bide quiet now, I reckon."

"They might try an' find out who'd been concealin' o' he all this time," said the flyman. "They'd get punished, sure 'nough. Aidin' an' abettin' a criminal is th' same as bein' a criminal offender. Tes wrote so in print up against police court walls, an' that's evidence."

"Yew knaws a powerful lot I s'pose, driver, seein' as ow yew lives up to Prince's town?"

"I du," said the flyman modestly. "Us gets to know an' to see an' to 'ear what ere's goin' round. Them married warders tells things to their wives, an' wimmen must clack. We all knaws that."

"'Twas surprisin' 'ow 'e ever got away," said the landlord. "It du seem as someone 'ad 'elped 'e. Wonder ef 'twill ever cum out?"

Chaffey found himself devoutly hoping it never would. The superiority of his present position gave him the right of interfering with the debate. He deemed it wise to try and throw them off the track.

"It wasn't necessary to be helped," he said. "There were two men, and they managed to break their chains, and get off in the fog. They weren't the first either."

"That be trew," observed another convivial soul. "It's been tried afore, an' it'll be tried again. But it baint no manner o' use. They be allays caught; dead or alive."

"This un ha' been the longest to keep out o' th' way, poor chap! Seems mortal 'ard to 'ave to give in arter all. Can't think why 'e didn't get right away, when 'e 'ad th' chance."

"Them clothes o' course," said the flyman. "'E couldn't 'a' got off the moor no how. Every place was watched, an' every train. They even 'ad search parties to call round at all th' 'ouses an' cottages. It du seem mysterious. 'Owever they'll 'ush it up now, an' glad to do it. Them other chaps'll suffer for it though. They'll not be allowed out of prison bounds for long 'nough."

Chaffey rose, declining the landlord's suggestion as to further orders. He was not so comfortable in his mind when he thought of the risks run, and the danger still to be faced.

Proud as he was of his own part in the achievement of an escape from Dartmoor he had a dis-

concerting memory of formalities concerning that discovered body. If any eyes were sharp enough to detect a difference, if suspicion was voiced as to the identity of the man in No. 96's dress with the actual 96—what then?

He must warn Geoffrey on no account to go near Princetown. And, for the rest—well, they must trust to providence to keep any official out of this district until he was able to leave it.

Aubrey Derringham was told of the discussion and the conjectures. "A good thing that that flyman didn't catch sight of Mr. Geoffrey, sir. I was thinking that all the time."

"We're not out of the wood yet," said Aubrey. "We must be very careful. It's fortunate that George Gale was never the genial house-visiting sort of cleric. The quieter and more aloof Geoffrey keeps himself the better for all concerned."

Then he dismissed the man, and threw himself down on the uninviting bed in a vain endeavour to snatch a few hours' sleep.

He was realizing every day, every hour, the danger of complications, and the danger of discovery. They had set themselves to play a game of Chance with Fate, and no one could decide yet who held the last trump that would decide the issue.

The next day the roads were as bad as ever. Aubrey walked, or rather waded, to the hotel at Two Bridges, and resolved to stay there until it

was possible to use the car. He left Chaffey on the ground to pick up information, and give the necessary warning to Geoffrey as to stations.

“Above all he mustn’t go to Princetown. When they leave suggest Moreton Hampstead, and motor them over. Mrs. Gale can take her own car, and I’ll drive the other with the luggage. I shall feel easier and safer somehow when they are gone.”

Chaffey brought word that Mrs. Gale was equally anxious to leave at once, and that he had put a wholesome terror of being “snowed up” into the old gentleman’s mind, if he didn’t seize the first fine day and get off.

So the third day after that fateful Christmas they arranged to leave. The roads were bad still, but passable. Aubrey, fearing Renée’s skill might be too severely taxed, offered to drive her, thus leaving Chaffey to pilot the “old gent,” as he called him. This arrangement precluded Geoffrey’s company, or parting scenes at the station. And as Aubrey tucked the rugs around the girl, and took his place by her side, he wondered if all that had happened since that last eventful time were not some evil dream. If, soon, he would not awake, and find the sun shining over the Cornish sea, and hear a laughing voice proclaiming the route for the day.

Neither of them spoke for some moments. He drove slowly and cautiously for fear of skidding, and she made no effort at attracting his attention.

Chaffey was leading. Her eyes were on his car, and the muffled figure of her father.

Aubrey glanced at her as they reached the open road which ran through the centre of the moor. "You've nothing now to fear, Renée," he said. "The worst's over."

She drew a deep breath. "I can't feel safe while he's there. The very likeness that helped us is now a danger."

"But I've warned him. He won't run any risks. It's wonderful how things have happened."

"You've heard nothing from—up there?"

He shook his head. "These things don't get into the papers. They're kept dark for fear of blame. Ah, my dear, try and put it out of your mind, and think only of yourself. Why not go to Madame Gascoigne for a time, after you leave your father?"

She shook her head. "No. She'd talk and question, and I'd have to pretend *he* was—alive. If I could only go away where no one knew, where I'd never hear his name."

"You must have patience. That day will come, but not just at once. Your father has no suspicion?"

"I'm sure he hasn't. Why should he?"

"One fears everything, just at first. In cool blood we could never have brought about this project. It's only on looking back one realizes what's happened, and its daring."

"It was—daring. Even now, when I wake

from sleep, I can't realize what's happened. That's why I don't want to face Madame Gascoigne. I couldn't pretend—always. She's known me all my life; she'd guess there was something wrong. Besides at Weymouth I should be reminded of you, and all that lovely time together. I—I couldn't bear it!"

He set his teeth and said nothing. It was no time for speech; such speech as burnt his heart like a hidden flame, and which her grief tempted into burning utterance.

She spoke no more till the pretty market town came into sight. Then she said: "I don't know when I am to see you again. Will you write?"

"If there's anything to tell," he said. "But, if all goes smoothly, there's no need. Geoffrey will be sending letters of course?"

She drew up her head with the little proud gesture he knew.

"I beg your pardon. I shouldn't have asked. Of course there's no need for you to write. You'll be glad enough to get rid of us all. We've only brought you trouble and annoyance."

"Renée!"

"Please understand I don't want to trouble you in the future in any way. I'm more sorry than I can tell that you ever came to Thrushelcombe. I suppose that was my fault too, like everything else. Understand though, that if ever anything of this comes out, I will take all the blame on myself. I'll deny that you had anything to do with it.

There's always the warder's daughter to back me up, and my car was well-known, and George——"

"You're a foolish little girl, Renée! You don't know what you're talking about!"

"I know perfectly well, Mr. Derringham," she said coldly.

The whistle of the train was a signal that stopped further conversation. The next few moments were hurried and confused; Andrew Jessop being a fussy traveller, and convinced that his only safeguard was to ask the same question of every railway official some dozen times over. He shook hands with Aubrey, and thanked him for what he called "the lift." It had been pleasanter than a musty jolting fly. Renée gave her hand, but said nothing, even when he whispered remorsefully—"I'll write—soon."

She sank back in her corner, the signal was given, and the puffing noisy little train bore its freight off and away to the life of towns and cities beyond this desolate moor.

Aubrey Derringham watched it out of sight. It was bearing away the only joy of his changed life. With her seemed to go all of interest that kept him here, chained to dull inactive days and lonely nights. And once again they had parted in anger. She was hurt and offended, as on that night at Weymouth, when she had proclaimed him another "disillusion." This time it was not altogether his fault. He foresaw a danger of which she was unconscious. He knew

to what he had been drifting, and as he compared those later happenings with previous incidents the lights and shadows showed up with startling distinctness.

Chaffey's voice roused him at last. He had been wondering why on earth his master remained on that cold draughty platform, staring after a departing train.

"Beg pardon, sir. I suppose we each take a car? Am I to have Mrs. Gale's, or yours?"

Aubrey started. "Oh . . . yes, of course, we must get back! I'll drive Ren—, I mean Mrs. Gale's. You can take mine to the hotel."

"We're not going home then, sir?"

"Home?"

"To Thrushelcombe, I meant, sir. The house has been left to itself a pretty fair time."

"We'll go back—tomorrow," said Aubrey.

"Then oughtn't I to get there tonight, sir; to light fires and air the place?"

Aubrey looked at him vacantly; his thoughts had been far away. What had she meant when she said that she couldn't bear to go back to Weymouth, because it would remind her of—him?

CHAPTER XXIII

“LIFE’S IRON CHAIN”

AUBREY turned and left the platform in the same vague undecided manner. Chaffey looked at him wonderingly. All this trouble and bother was beginning to affect him. There ought to be an end to it now.

He got into Aubrey’s car, and watched him start the engine and get into the one that Renée had so often occupied. Something in the way his master looked at the wheel, and touched the rugs, startled the man. An uneasy suspicion darted into his mind.

“Good Lord! . . . is *that* what it means?” he thought. Then the little car glided off ahead of him. He followed, a new expression in his watchful eyes.

There seemed to be no end to the complications arising out of that Forgery Case.

Aubrey drove up to the house, and got out. Renée kept her car in a disused coach house at “The Poor John.” He wanted to tell Geoffrey that, and also ask if he would like to learn how to drive it.

He found him in the parlour crouched over the fire. His whole aspect listless and dispirited.

"They're safely off," said Aubrey. "It's a good thing this has been arranged. Now—about yourself? We have to remember that you and I were not the best of friends. It was Renée I knew. If I stayed on here it might look suspicious. So I'm going back to the house. Then, there's the car. You'll have to learn to drive it. Perhaps Chaffey——"

The boy lifted his head wearily. "What a lot of trouble I'm giving you, and I'm not worth it. It was playing the fool brought me into this scrape. Having only myself to blame I should have tried to bear it. But I seem to have lost my head, and my courage too."

"You mustn't do that. A great deal depends on the next month."

"Month? Alone here! I'm supposed to be a drunkard, and unpopular. I can't even salve my conscience by doing a little good; playing my part, as I could play it."

"Do you mean——?"

"I mean I'd like to visit those queer villagers. Have some sort of straight talk with them. Give a helping hand where it was needed. Instead I must slink about like a cur afraid even of that tumble-down old church, that doddering sexton!"

"Yes, but my dear boy, remember you've burned your boats. You mustn't look back. If you wish

to play at parish priest, there's nothing against it. They may think your wife has converted you. She's a prime favourite here."

"They're more likely to think I've driven her away."

"I suppose your uncle never suspected anything?"

"Never. He was just the same as he'd always been. Perhaps he expected a little more outward show of connubial felicity, but Renée's health and grief quite accounted for—the difference."

"She's gone through a terrible time," said Aubrey gravely. "I know that."

"He—George wasn't violent—to her?" questioned the boy fiercely.

"She wouldn't say. But I often feared, especially after her suspicions were aroused as to his guilt."

"Ah!" Geoffrey drew a quick breath, his hand clutched the arm of the chair. "Tell me about that; she never would."

"I think he must have let something out when—well, when he didn't know what he was saying. After that, she was desperate about releasing you. My only fear was that she'd betray herself and that suspicion would light on her."

"Did the search party ever come here?"

"Only once, and fortunately George was away. No one saw him, and Renée could prove that neither she nor her car had been on the road that day of the—escape."

"It's still a sort of nightmare. I don't know how I did it."

He sprang up and began to pace the room. "Three days; surely nothing could come out now? The enquiries must be over, and he's buried as I should have been, if I'd stayed in that awful place."

"I wish you could forget all that."

"Forget it! I never can. Who could forget the maddening indignities put upon one! The stripping in a cold stony corridor before brutal officials, pulling, peering, questioning, as if your body was a bit of mechanism. The taking of finger impressions, the marking of every spot or blemish. The misery of a lonely cell, the filthy food, the vile company; the knowledge that you're watched and spied on, of no more account than the cog in a wheel which helps to keep the machinery going. The tasks, the harsh rules, the callous faces, and a smug-faced chaplain telling you of God's mercy and Christ's atonement every Sunday, by way of showing up the contrasts of the week! I know lots of them took it philosophically, but I couldn't. I was degraded in my own sight, and the iron branded my soul. It seared out all the good that had ever been there. I could have murdered that warder with absolute joy in the stripping a brute of the power to brutalize another living soul, as mine had been brutalized! I often thought I'd try. He knew I hated him, and he made good use of the knowledge."

"It was unwise to make an enemy," said Aubrey. "Supposing there was something about George that did not tally with the description of yourself? Supposing that man ever met *you*?"

"I'm always thinking that. My only hope is that he'd be satisfied with getting his prisoner back. We're like enough to pass for each other. There'd be no one to raise a question."

"What about the inquest?"

"The authorities would keep that dark. The papers announced that the missing man had been discovered. To all intents and purposes he had. He'd died from exposure and exhaustion. The doctor would only make a perfunctory examination. They'd be glad enough to hush it up to prove what they always maintain that no one has ever managed an escape from Dartmoor, though many have attempted it."

"Fate has played into our hands," said Aubrey. "But for your likeness to George, and his to you, we could never have done it."

"I've often wondered," said Geoffrey suddenly, "whether he—George—suspected I was hiding somewhere near. Whether he thought that Renée knew—something."

"She says he never mentioned your name. It may be that he was glad you had got off. He knew that you were undergoing an unmerited punishment."

"Of course he knew that. It was preying on his mind, driving him to one sort of desperation,

as it drove me to another. I had been a young light-hearted fool when this blow crushed all the youth and freedom of life out of me. You say I look young still? God knows I don't feel it!"

"Time is your best cure, Geoffrey. Time heals all, consoles all. Don't give yourself leisure for thought. Read, work, *do* things. Perhaps the car will bring you some consolation. It did to Renée. I leave it to you and Chaffey. He'll show you all about it."

He held out his hand. Geoffrey seized it, and held it in both of his.

"What a thundering good chap you are, Derringham! God knows what I'd have done but for you, and Renée says the same."

"You mustn't take it all too seriously," said Aubrey. "I've only tried to help you as you've helped me. I was a useless idler on the highway of Life, when one day I walked into a courtroom, and realized what a fierce tragic thing life could be. After that—I couldn't idle away hours and opportunities, and Fate sent me a mission."

He released his hand and laid it on the boy's shoulder; looking down at the tragic young eyes.

"To all intents and purposes I've done a wrong thing," he said. "But before God, Geoffrey Gale, I feel it's a *right* one! Anyhow, I don't regret it, neither must you. After all, human justice isn't infallible. It plays up to a theory for a given purpose. Sometimes the theory doesn't fit the purpose. Here was an instance.

You had committed no crime, why should you be treated as a criminal? Again, suffering that is merited may be wholesome, but unmerited suffering turns men into relentless savages, for the time. I've seen it, you've known it. Viewing your case from a psychological standpoint I hold you justified even as I hold myself. There's only one point unsettled—" He dropped his hand. "Have you any direct proof that your brother committed the crime for which he allowed you to suffer? In case of any future trouble we ought to have that cleared up."

Geoffrey shook his head. "I've no direct proof, as yet. But there are all his papers and documents to look through. I might find something."

"Are they—here?"

"Yes, so Renée said. In an old bureau in my room. It used to be his room."

"Well, I should look them through; that's to say, if Renée doesn't object."

"She gave me the keys last night," he said.

"That looks as if you were to be her deputy."

"Everything in that room is as he brought it from home, so she told me. His books, and clothes, and trunks, and that old bureau. He always kept letters and papers there."

"An unwise thing to do. But you wanted some employment. Here it is, ready made. And now, I must really be off."

"You—couldn't look in again tonight, I suppose?" faltered Geoffrey. "I shall be alone, and

I hate to be alone! Every sound, every footstep is like a threat of pursuit!"

"But there can be no pursuit now. You must pluck up courage and learn to rely upon yourself. I'd come again, of course, only, as I told you, he and I were never friends. It will excite comment, and *that* must be avoided at any cost."

"I know you're right," said the boy. "I'll do my best."

He followed him out into the little hall, and opened the door. He watched him get into the car and drive down the narrow street. Then he went back to the lonely house, and to the consolation that it at least meant safety, and that he had not to keep up any more false pretences so far as Renée was concerned.

That evening when Ann Whyddon brought in his tea, she informed him that she was going home to sleep every night while "the missus" was away.

"Mother ses I be a vartuous maid, an' it baint vitty to bide 'ere alone with a man, even ef 'e be a clargyman. So I'll tidy up th' kitchen, sir, an' go 'ome."

"All right, you can go," said Geoffrey, recalled again to his brother's unenviable reputation. Evidently there had been scenes here, and the girl was not desirous of witnessing one played for her sole benefit. No doubt she pictured him revelling in a solitary debauch tonight. His wife had

gone, so had the visitor. There was no restraining influence to keep him in check.

The boy smiled somewhat bitterly as the door closed. Had he been inclined to deaden thought, or drown his sorrow and fears, there was a side-board of temptation in the room. Fortunately for himself excesses in that line made no appeal. Besides he had decided upon an occupation for tonight. He would open that old bureau of his brother's, and search through its contents for some proof of that innocence he had always avowed and of which George had been fully conscious.

With the whole evening before him, Geoffrey Gale yet postponed that self-given task from moment to moment, and hour to hour. The solitude of the house oppressed his nerves, and every creak in the wainscot, or crack of burning log, set them jangling like wires unstrung. From time to time he looked around as if doubtful that it could be himself alone here in George Gale's house, attired in George Gale's habit? Events had marched so quickly, situation after situation had been so forced upon his acceptance, that his memory only held confused pictures of the actual facts. Had he known of what this masquerade would mean he felt he could never have gone through with it, but its developments had been gradual, brought about by a sequence of coincidences that no plotting or planning could have suggested.

The very change in his uncle had rendered

deception easy, for old Jessop harassed and distressed by the tragedy of the prisoner's escape was no longer the stern exacting accuser who had arraigned and brought him to justice. Against these things he set his own sufferings, and the memory of those prison days.

Again he felt the nerve-shock of clanging doors, of rattling keys, heard the rough voices and harsh commands of those to whom innocence or guilt made no difference seeing that a gaol bird was only a victim of the laws they were bound to enforce. Again he saw the sullen face of that one man he had instinctively hated, and had once fiercely insulted in a moment of uncontrollable passion. Would he remember him if by any chance they met?

He rose and looked at himself in the small oval chimney glass. How pale he was, and how terrified his eyes still looked. Would they ever lose that strained expression; that sense of covert fear? Would he ever be able to rise above the sense of deception; to take his place in life, and look men in the face unflinchingly?

He nerved himself again to that task he had resolved to accomplish. He would go through with it now—at last.

He lit the candle left for him on the sideboard, and went up the creaking wooden stairs to that room above. He had hated to use it, even for that one night. It seemed haunted by the man in whose place he stood. Now that Renée had left, he had

determined to use her room, and had taken possession of it that afternoon, and ordered Ann Whyddon to light the fire before she left.

He put his candle down on the dressing-table, and looked at the old oak bureau. It stood in a corner of the room, closed and locked. He took out the keys Renée had given him, and tried them in the lock of the closed flap. One fitted, and he turned down the ledge, and looked at the row of pigeonholes filled with papers, letters, memoranda of all sorts; things of school and college days; one or two pocket diaries. He remembered that George had always been in the habit of noting engagements, duties, appointments. He looked at the dates of the diaries. One was of the present time, the others ran back to three or four years previously. He put them aside. Then took out the letters and the neatly docketed and tied papers.

There were three drawers below to be examined, but he felt he had material enough for the present. He put them all together, and closed the bureau and locked it again. Then he took the papers into the room opposite, and stood a moment regarding it as one regards a holy place. It spoke of her in every simple detail that made it so purely feminine. In the white hangings, and the toilet trifles on the dressing-table, the chintz-covered chair by the fire, the half-open cupboard where hung a dress or petticoat that she had worn. A bright fire blazed in the grate. The room spoke to him, like herself, offering the comfort and rest he had found no-

where in this house. He went in and laid the papers and the diaries down on a small table by the fire.

"I'll read them here," he said softly. "He doesn't seem to haunt this room, like the others."

Then he went down to put out the lamp and lock the doors; a memory of that dead man echoing in every grating sound.

The curtains were drawn, the candles lit. An atmosphere of peace reigned in the quiet room. Before the fire Geoffrey Gale sat and read the extracts in those diaries. Queer disjointed fragments, notes of college exploits, of friendships and enmities, of home incidents. Underlying an occasional entry flashed a spark of jealousy; an ever constant fear, dating from boyhood, that Renée preferred Geoffrey to himself. Here and there initials pointed to a growing dislike of his brother. "That hateful G." "That insufferable young idiot." "Hot-headed fool," and similar complimentary remarks. Here and there too came hints of escapade or trouble of his own. Then a series of blanks. Then rough brief hints of coming discovery, followed by notes of a discussion with his uncle. Then a description of the trial; carefully worded, ending with the sentence, and a brief—"Thank God, *that's* over!"

Thank God!

Geoffrey flung the book on the floor in a spasm of rage and indignation. He could say that!

Write *that*, knowing that the accusation was false, the evidence false, the verdict unjustified, the sentence—undeserved!

He could thank God for that martyrdom, the horrors and indignities which had broken health and nerve and fortitude! He could thank God! why? Because it left the field free for himself. Because Geoffrey was safely out of the way. Because he could claim Renée, cold, passive, reluctant, for his wife.

After a stormy moment or two, he again lifted the book, and went on with it, turning the pages with rapid fingers. It seemed that whatever George had done it had brought no satisfaction. No single record breathed happiness, or dignified his married life with anything save brief hints of wasted passion, baffled ardour, cold tolerance that was driving him to a drunkard's consolation. He had sinned, and the fruits of sin were bitter. His conscience was a hell, and in the pure reproachful look of his young wife's eyes he daily read his own condemnation.

Geoffrey hurried on. He reached the last records of this last month. They were blotted, feverish, scarce readable, but one and all betrayed the obsession of an idea. Geoffrey had escaped. Geoffrey might come here one day. Geoffrey *knew*, and would murder him in his rage at what had been done. The tortured spirit went in fear of every chance meeting; every received letter, every newspaper paragraph. No wonder he had

sought oblivion in drink, nor dared to show himself beyond his parish boundaries till after nightfall.

Geoffrey closed the last diary with a feeling of pity. A tortured soul had faced him, its despair outweighing his own a thousand times, for it was self-wrought, the fruit of evil thought and evil deeds.

What stood against himself was but the folly of youth; its brief sins, its long repentance. He looked at the letters. Some were in his own writing; some were from his uncle, some from Renée.

"I won't read them," he thought. "I know as much as I shall ever know. It's not likely that he'd have left any proof of his own misdoings. I don't suppose these incoherent ravings would mean anything to any one but myself. Still, I'd better keep them. Derringham might like to see them."

He threw the letters in the fire, and watched them blaze and flutter into black fragments. Then he rose, and threw himself on his knees by Renée's bed, and for the first time since all this trouble and terror had fallen upon his life—Geoffrey Gale prayed.

CHAPTER XXIV

“ THE PRISON AND ITS PREY ”

RENÉE the girl was slowly changing into Renée the woman. Waking, so it seemed, from the sleep of indifference to life's fuller meaning.

In her old home, surrounded by associations of her girlhood, she wondered how she could ever have been persuaded into that mockery of union which had meant marriage. She saw herself outraged, tortured, wounded, and distraught. Saw illusion after illusion stripped and mocked at. Saw all the horrors of a false position, and watched, as it were, the whole edifice of domesticity tumbling into wreck and ruin around her.

And she could say nothing. She must say nothing—now. Her father's questioning was an added torture for he had never met the George that she knew. How could he believe ill of that other George, under whose roof he had spent three days and nights of renewed intimacy; renewed favouritism?

Always in his eyes it was George who had stood for all the virtues, and Geoffrey for all the sins. So they stood still, though the tragic fate of the

sinner had in some measure softened hostility, and aroused compassion. The harping on one or other of these strings became intolerable to Renée. In desperation she kept her room, and declared herself too ill and upset for any long talks. The family doctor agreed with her. He had known them all for long, and knew of their trouble of the previous year. He had known Renée as a girl. He had seen her married, a pale, too serious bride, yet as a clergyman's wife that was not surprising. But this nerve-shattered sorrowful creature who had returned to her home bore no likeness to either the radiant girl, or the serious young bride. He was appalled at the change. He could only counsel entire rest, and the exclusion of anything likely to excite or disturb her.

The New Year came and passed, and was rung in hopefully to all ears but hers, or so she thought in sorrow's exclusiveness of sorrow. The cold bleak days lapsed into cold empty weeks. Geoffrey wrote of course. His handwriting and George's were as alike as their personal appearance, and her father would bring the letters to her with a remark on husbandly attentions, and a hope that they would cheer her up. Geoffrey wrote stiffly and coldly. He dared not let himself go. He told her of his daily life, of Ann's guarded "virtue"; of his empty church, and its useless services. Of his terror that something in the shape of wedding or funeral might lay formal demand upon him. Of Aubrey Derringham's return to Thrushel-

combe, and Chaffey's instructions in motor driving.

But he said nothing of his horror of that lonely house, of the long dreary days, the long haunted nights. Neither did he say anything of those diaries, or of a discovered cheque book, in which George seemed to have practised signatures and figures, with extraordinary ability. It had been thrust into a secret aperture of the bureau. Only by the merest chance had Geoffrey discovered it. A hundred times might that receptacle have been searched and examined and no one would have noticed that little fitted panel. Possibly George had thrust this book into the hollow behind it, and forgotten all about the fact. Or again possibly he might have kept it as incriminating Geoffrey, for the writing was curiously like his own.

Evidently this was the missing cheque book spoken of at the trial. It showed the cunning and the patience of the forger in every detail. Also it showed how much skill had been wasted, for after all it was not Andrew Jessop's signature that had been forged, only the figures of the cheque and their written counterpart.

But what use to tell Renée all this. Geoffrey locked away the diaries and that cheque book in a leather portfolio he had discovered. They were useless now. The extraordinary resemblance of the two handwritings, the absence of George Gale's name as identification was only another link of confusion; it could do nothing towards establishing a crime, or proving an error of law.

Cold bitter weather and heavy snow-storms made January a month to remember. Renée seemed to grow paler and thinner every day, and her father became seriously alarmed. The doctor spoke of a warmer climate, south of France, or south of England. Could she not go there? This bleak midland air was quite unsuited to her. Her father suggested Weymouth and Madame Gascoigne, but she refused. If she went anywhere it would be Cornwall; to a little sheltered corner of the coast where the sun shone, and the air was soft and healthful. She remembered such a place, and its quaint inn and fishers' cottages. It was near enough to Penzance to be assured of all necessary requirements. Let her go there, and let her go alone!

Old Jessop was astonished at the earnestness of the request. He consulted the doctor, and by his advice wrote privately to Madame Gascoigne for help in this dilemma. The old French lady replied by return of post, putting herself at their disposal, ready to come to her *chère petite* at any moment, if she desired.

Renée was informed that she might go to Cornwall, if she chose, but not unaccompanied. And when she heard of the old French lady's offer she gave in.

Her father wrote to Geoffrey, and told him of the arrangement, lamenting the circumstances and the distance, but cheering him with the hope that his wife's health would improve, and that in

a month or two she would be able to return to Dartmoor.

Geoffrey read the letter with a sense of relief. A month or two might mean the end of his own ordeal. Already he had told the Rector that the place did not suit "Mrs. Gale," and that he must throw up the curacy. His next trouble was concerned with the formalities that would enable him to resume an independent position. How was that to be done? He had no desire to be interviewed by a Bishop; give reason for a change of opinion that meant resigning his position in the church. He was no theological student. He could not argue, or explain, or seek explanation. He could only say he must resign, hoping to avoid unnecessary lies.

The impassable roads had made it impossible for him to get to Thrushelcombe. Chaffey had returned before the heavy snow-storm had cut off communication, and Geoffrey had remained shut up in the dreary little village, and the lonely house; trying to steady his nerves and bear his solitude as best he could.

Not a word had reached them from Princetown. They could only suppose there had been no doubt raised as to identification. The dead man was accepted as Geoffrey Gale, Convict 96, and as such had been buried and registered.

As the days passed into weeks, Geoffrey began to feel safer. The perfunctory duties of his Sundays made no claim on his conscience for scarce a soul

came to hear him preach, and his efforts with the wheezy harmonium were only a source of amazement to the ancient sexton and his more ancient wife. As for the old Rector, he slept and drank, and drank and slept through the dreary winter days, forgetful of everything except creature comforts; indifferent alike to his parish or his curate.

When Geoffrey suggested that he should seek another helper he only gave an asthmatic chuckle, and promised to "think about it." It seemed to Geoffrey that the thought would never resolve itself into action, and that if he was to have a substitute he must provide one himself. All this made him the more eager to see Aubrey Derringham, and ask his advice. He knew nothing of the discovery in the bureau. They had not met since Renée left. Sometimes Geoffrey wondered uneasily whether anything had happened? whether Aubrey had gone to London? But surely if that were so, he would have written. There was nothing for it but patience, and the writing of long letters to Renée, which were never sent when written, for fear of adding to her distress, or falling into her father's hands.

When he heard of the Cornish project, and was asked to give his consent to it, he felt the relief of coming freedom. Once he got away from here he resolved to go abroad. South America for choice. If Renée wished to accompany him they could travel as brother and sister. If she preferred remaining in England some excuse of health, or

difference of opinion, would have to satisfy her father. But, as he thought and planned, the longing to see Aubrey became more and more intolerable. He looked at the steely clouds, and the melting snow, and cursed the fate that kept them apart.

Inactivity was torture in his present frame of mind, for it showed him only too clearly how helpless he was, and tried the stoicism of hard-won fortitude to the uttermost. But an end comes to all things, and one day the sun shone, and the snow melted, and a message reached him from Aubrey Derringham. If the roads were passable next day would Geoffrey come to Two Bridges? They could lunch together and discuss matters. Geoffrey prayed devoutly that the roads would be at least—fordable. One could hope for nothing better; but waterproof boots were at hand, part of George's fishing equipment, and the sun rose again in a clear sky, and he set forth.

The two young men held a long and serious discussion.

Both had had time and opportunity to think out the whole matter, and Aubrey Derringham was ready with projects more or less feasible. He had risked the meeting here, and watched keenly the faces of landlord and waiters, all of whom had seen George Gale many times. They were absolutely unsuspecting. Aubrey had taken care that the meeting should have only the appear-

ance of accident. Neither he nor Geoffrey showed any special cordiality. The conversation was kept to every day topics, and not till they sat over coffee and cigarettes in the deserted lounge was the real object of their meeting broached.

Geoffrey hurriedly related what he had heard from Renée. There was no question now of her returning here. He had sent in a formal resignation of his curacy. He was to sell up the furniture and effects by Renée's desire, and then leave the place for ever. He told Aubrey of his difficulties respecting formal resignation of clerical orders. Derringham promised to enquire into that.

"I am leaving for London tomorrow," he said. "That's why I came here. I shall stop the night, and take the first train from Moreton. Chaffey remains a week or two longer. Then he will shut up Thrushelcombe and join me."

"Are you giving up the house?" asked Geoffrey.

"No. That might look suspicious. I keep it on. It will serve as a retreat for Chaffey, or I can let it in the summer, for the fishing."

"You did not take it for *that* reason? I've often wondered——"

"I took it," said Aubrey coldly, "for a whim. I was motoring over the moor and had a fancy to see more of it. The place was to let, and I put Chaffey in, and came when the fancy took me."

"Pray don't think I'm impertinent," said Geoffrey flushing hotly. "But it was such a queer out-of-the-way place; I couldn't help wondering.

And something Renée said made me curious. Surely, surely you didn't do it for my sake, because you knew that she was planning my escape?"

"I'm afraid I did," said Aubrey, with a sudden smile. "Quixotic, wasn't it? Never mind. I've done one good deed in my life, at least in my opinion, and I suppose in yours? Now that's enough. You haven't told me yet of any discovery among those papers."

Then Geoffrey related the incident of the secret drawer, the cheque book, the diaries. "None of these things *prove* anything," he said. "A third person might not, in fact would not, be able to say whether the writing was mine, or his. It was our misfortune to be alike in so much, and different in so little."

"Still I should like to see them," said Aubrey. "There are two people whom I should like to convince of your innocence. Whom I *mean* to convince, if I can. One is your uncle, Andrew Jessop. The other——"

He paused, and looked at the flushed face and eager eyes.

"The other?"

"You'd never guess, my boy. It is your counsel. The man who defended you—Joshua Myers."

All the colour went out of the boyish face. That name brought back the tragedy of his life. The awful moments in the court house, the ques-

tions and accusations, the pitiless condemnation that had been his fate.

"For God's sake, Derringham, don't rake *that* up again!" he implored. "If you spoke to Myers he'd suspect a reason. I suppose he knows of the escape."

"No doubt, and of the discovery. But what of that? These documents may have been found by Renée."

"But you forget who *I* am. Is it likely she would betray her—husband?"

"There will be no question of betraying *you*, Geoffrey. Have no fear. I shall not move in the matter until it is perfectly safe. And for your own satisfaction let me tell you that Myers has always believed in your innocence."

"But he would not feel justified in concealing my escape. You couldn't expect it."

"I'm not going to tell him of that, till the term of your sentence has expired. There'd be no use then in raking up the story. You can't be tried again. Your death has been accepted and notified."

"There's more than a year to run," faltered Geoffrey. "If I could get away, out of England, I'd feel safe. But here—I feel there's danger in every curious eye that looks at me."

"You must try and get over that."

Aubrey rose. "I'll walk back with you," he said. "The road on this side is better than mine."

"Will you? I'll be delighted!" Geoffrey sprang to his feet, and Aubrey summoned a waiter, and

told him to bring their overcoats and hats. Together the two walked out of the porch and past the window of the bar. Geoffrey Gale was on the inner side and glanced casually into the room, where three men were standing and drinking. His wide soft hat was slightly pushed back; his face was distinctly visible. One of the men caught sight of it, and hastily put down his tankard, and rushed to the door. He stood there a moment gazing after the two figures, then went slowly back.

"Who's the young parson?" he enquired of the barman. "Living anywhere hereabouts?"

"Parson? D'you mean the young un as 'elps the Rector up to Shapsdown?"

"He was here. He's just gone past."

"That be the curate. 'E ain't been 'ere for long 'nough. Used to come fishin' summer time, now and again."

"Know his name?"

"Never 'eard on't. Landlord knows he I've no doubt."

The man asked no more questions, but slowly emptied his tankard and went out and into the hotel porch. A waiter demanded his business.

"Is there a gentleman staying here—a clergyman sort o' chap?" he enquired.

"The clergyman's not staying," said the waiter. "The other gent is, only for the night. He goes to London tomorrow."

"D'ye happen to know the name o' the clergyman? I seem to know his face."

"He's the Reverend Mr. Gale; lives at Shaps-down Rectory."

"Gale! Well, that's queer!"

"D'ye mean the name, or the gent? He's all right when he's not too free with the drink. Used to run a pretty score here, he did."

"You know him then? You're quite sure he is Mr.—Gale?"

"As sure as I know myself."

"It's queer," repeated the man. "Well, good afternoon, I must be getting back."

The waiter watched him as he got into the little trap, in which he had driven from Princetown. He wondered why he had been so curious. There was nothing in his appearance to connect him with the Great Palace of the Duchy set in the midst of these moorland wastes, for even officialdom can at times have its "day off," and divest itself of state liveries. Yet the man was the surly warder of whom Geoffrey Gale had such a horror; the man, whom of all connected with his prison life, he most feared and hated.

Driving over the steep road, and through melting snow and running water, the man puzzled himself over that likeness.

The face that he had seen passing the window in the pale glow of the wintry sunlight was the face that had so often flashed defiance, and open hatred to his own. The figure in its clerical garb was in every respect of height and build the figure

of that escaped prisoner. How was such a likeness possible? The more he thought the deeper grew his perplexity.

He ground his teeth with a sudden vicious snap. "By God—if he's tricked me, I'll make him pay for it! I swear I will! It could have been done *that* way—no other! And p'raps that cool insolent Londoner has had a finger in the pie after all. The question is how on earth are we going to explain that we've got hold of the *wrong man*! The Guv'nor would never believe me, no, nor any of the authorities! Catch them acknowledge a mistake once it's made. The only thing they'd do would be to watch my gentleman in future. I don't know that I hadn't best keep this to myself. But I can try frightening that young fool up at Shapsdown. He was always a bit of a coward. And the Londoner, he'd look queer, I'm thinking, if we could bring him in 'accessory after the fact.' Wonder if I could work this out? There's money in it. An income for life—properly worked!"

CHAPTER XXV

“ A DEBT TO PAY ”

THE mild days of February seemed to promise atonement for previous stress and storm. There was a hint of blue in the sky, of warmth in the sun. The frozen streams trickled a merry release, and the highways of the great moor were again passable.

Geoffrey Gale's fears grew less with each departing day. He drove his little car along the unfrequented roads, and explored queer old tumble-down villages, and tried to hope that life might soon fulfil itself in fresh interests and occupations.

Renée wrote him fully and frankly from her Cornish retreat. Aubrey Derringham was back in London investigating the necessary formalities of resignation of office. Geoffrey had grown used to the lonely house, and to Ann Whyddon's virtuous ministrations. He read service in the church to a scattered congregation of three to six parishioners, and with every such reading found his task easier. It was a task bound to grow mechanical, even for those whose duty it was to perform it. There were times when Geoffrey blessed the me-

chanical effort for all it brought of consolation. It would not be needed much longer. Aubrey hoped a month, or less, might bring release, and set him free to follow his own inclinations.

One sunny afternoon he fetched the car from its queer garage, and thought he would run over to Thrushelcombe. He knew that Chaffey was shortly to leave the house and rejoin his master in London. Geoffrey wanted a last word with him, and to hear again that reassurance of safety which meant so much to the three conspirators, and meant everything to himself.

The little car jolted and rolled over the terrible rough ground which made such demands on tyres. Chaffey had instructed its driver in the simpler mechanical duties of chauffeur, and specially in the use of the Stepney. So far the strong sturdy little Renault had resisted even stones and ruts to effect a puncture.

On this occasion however an ominous "bang" warned Geoffrey of fatality. The car was in an open space of roadway. He got it as much to the side as possible, and then dismounted, threw off his coat and hat, rolled up his sleeves, and set to work. The sound of wheels coming down the hillside behind him disturbed his labours at last. He rose and looked round. Even as he did so, a sense of the folly that is a man's undoing hammered useless warnings in his ears.

The vehicle was a light two-wheeled dogcart. The driver was looking down at him with the look

that had so often driven hatred and despair into his soul. For a brief second fear held him powerless. Dressed as George Gale he might have assumed George Gale's personality. In this mechanic's garb of rolled up sleeves and coatless negligence, he felt it was *himself* that he looked. That his eyes betrayed him to his enemy even while his dry lips strove for speech.

"There's plenty room to pass!"

That was what he said, and even as he said it knew the man had no intention of passing. That he had drawn up his horse, and was sitting on the high seat, and would remain sitting there watching efforts which that surveillance turned to nervous feebleness.

"Oh yes, there's room," said the man. "Puncture—I suppose?"

"Speaks for itself," muttered Geoffrey, stooping down over the rim, and mechanically forcing his hands to do something which his brain could not visualize.

"P'raps I could help you?" suggested his enemy, smiling the old hateful smile as he watched the nervous hands.

"No, thanks, I quite understand. You'd better get on. Your horse is fidgety."

"He'll have to stand as long as I want him to," answered his tormentor. "I'm not used to giving in to beast or man."

Geoffrey said nothing. His pulses beat like hammers. The blood throbbed in his temples

as if the throbbing veins must burst. He pulled and twisted and jerked, but seemed to get no further with his task. And all the time those merciless eyes watched, and those thin lips sneered, and Geoffrey felt the gaze and the sneer in every fibre of his trembling body.

At last the courage of despair came to him. He looked up and spoke the anger he felt.

"I wish you'd go on. I hate to be watched while I'm working. I don't need your help."

"Hate to be watched? Always did, didn't you?"

The evil face looked its insolent assurance, and anger sprang as of old to incautious lips.

"How dare you speak like that! What do you mean?"

"I think you know very well what I mean—Mr. Geoffrey Gale!"

The boy's heart seemed to stand still, as when those cold irons had first touched his wrists. Then all of manhood that he could summon rallied itself for a final effort. He straightened himself and looked full at the taunting face.

"You must be mad," he said, "or drunk! I'm not Geoffrey Gale!"

"Never heard of him perhaps?" sneered the warder.

Geoffrey took his courage in his hands for a last desperate effort. "Heard of him," he said slowly. "Of course I've heard of him. He was my—brother."

Perhaps the calm avowal disconcerted the arrogant questioner. Suspicion wavered for a moment, doing battle with the instinct that assured him he was right. The eyes that looked back at him were no longer frightened or defiant. They simply challenged a denial of a statement.

"Brother? If you're his *brother*, and a clergyman at that, you didn't show much brotherly interest in him while he was up there, that I'll say."

"May I ask what business that is—of yours?" demanded Geoffrey.

"You don't know me I suppose? Never saw me before?"

"I certainly never wish to see you again! Will you drive on, and mind your own business, and leave me to mine!"

"Look 'ere," said the man. "Bluff's a good dog, but my name's Holdfast. There's been a clever bit of trickery done round here, and I'm going to search it out. All very easy for you to pretend you're the Reverend George, but I'm not convinced that way. A straight collar and a long coat aren't everything. There's hands—for instance. Perhaps you forget we've got Geoffrey Gale's finger prints? Suppose you had to prove your hands weren't the hands from which we took 'em, what then, Mr. Gale, what then?"

"You'd learn 'what then' in due course," said Geoffrey coolly. "You're talking rank nonsense, and so I tell you, as I'd tell any one who

made such statements. Do you suppose there aren't dozens of people to speak of the likeness which has deceived you? Dozens of people to prove that I am—who I say I am?"

"Oh! I grant you've got a clever case," said the man. "But don't think it's going to be all plain sailing. You've been watched, and you'll be watched again. You've had your warning; take it or leave it. There's some eyes as you can't throw dust into, clever as you may be!"

He touched his horse and it sprang forward, and the dogcart rolled on, leaving Geoffrey stooping still over that ill-adjusted Stepney. It was true then. He was suspected. There had been a difference between George and himself. A difference that raised doubt and might yet demand proof.

He felt his heart sink. Those words "You've been watched" rang unpleasantly in his ears. Perhaps his changed habits, his sobriety, had challenged remark. Yet it seemed to him impossible that the fame of such actions could have reached as far as Princetown. He was so agitated that the wheel slipped from his hands. At the same moment a familiar "toot-toot" sounded, and he saw a small car running towards him. He recognized the other Renault, and Chaffey driving it.

In a couple of moments it was beside him, and he was explaining his difficulties. Chaffey jumped down and came to his assistance.

"I was on my way to you," said Geoffrey eagerly.

"And I thought of looking you up, sir. I'm leaving here in a day or two. Mr. Derringham said I was to let you know."

Then Geoffrey related what had taken place. It sounded an alarm for all concerned. Chaffey's consternation was not reassuring.

"Just what I always feared!" he exclaimed. "Finger prints, or some body mark that meant a difference. Damn that brute! Couldn't he have let well alone!"

"Whether I go or stay it's equally dangerous," said Geoffrey gloomily.

"But stay a little longer if you can, sir. Don't show the white feather at first alarm. After all he's not everyone, this warder. And he'll have his work cut out to make folks believe him. Them prison authorities are only too glad to let sleeping dogs lie."

"It was unfortunate I had taken off my hat," said Geoffrey. "But what use to quibble. He's had his suspicions and he means to work on my fears, or perhaps it's blackmail he's after?"

"A risky game for one in his position. I don't know what to say, sir. I wish Mr. Derringham was here."

"I'm glad he isn't," said Geoffrey. "I hope to goodness he'll keep away from here, and from me, too, for the next twelve months."

"He's not likely to do that, sir. Once he takes

a thing into his head he'll see it through. And it's astonishing how he believes in you, sir, and did from the first."

"He's been the best friend I ever had," said Geoffrey earnestly.

"I say the same!" exclaimed Chaffey. "What he's done for me the Lord only knows. I'd give my right hand to help him, sir, if he wanted it. That I would."

The boy lifted his head, and looked away over the moor to the distant ring of hills. His hatred of the place, the longing to be free of it, and its associations, swept over him like a flood.

"Chaffey, I *can't* bear it—I must go! If you knew what it was shut up in that dismal house. . . . Renée gone, Derringham gone, now you. Why can't I take the car and get off with myself? Catch some outgoing steamer at Plymouth. Defy them all."

"You could, sir, of course, but it would look suspicious. You've done it so well up to now. Can't you be patient a little longer? There's your cousin to think of, you know?"

"True, I forgot. Yes, we must save her from any suspicion. But oh—if I only knew what that brute means to do! It's the suspense that's so hard to bear!"

"D'you think I don't know it, sir? There—your wheel's all right. What are you going to do. Come to my place and talk it out? If so I'll run on ahead."

"Yes, I'll come to your place," said Geoffrey, putting on his coat again. "I wonder if any one's watching us, Chaffey?"

"Don't get thinkin' of that, sir. It'll unnerve you. Believe me, it's best to put a bold face on things. I hope you didn't let him see you were frightened, sir?"

"I think not. I absolutely denied his accusation. He answered: 'Bluff was a good dog, but Hold-fast was a better.' I take that to mean he's going to hold on to his idea. Only I don't see how he can possibly prove it."

"No more he could, sir. I shouldn't worry. It's my belief he's playing a low-down trick to get money out of somebody. If he took this cock-and-bull story to the Guv'nor I'm sure he'd be told to go about his business. What could he prove against your uncle's word, the old Rector, your own wife! They'd all stand to it you were George Gale, and who's to prove you're not?"

So Geoffrey took heart again, and went back to that first refuge, and spent the next hour weighing the *pros* and *cons* of the situation until once again he felt that the exchanged identities would never be challenged, or that *if* challenged could never be proved.

In her quiet retreat in that sunny nook of Cornwall Renée rested and reflected, and took counsel with her own heart.

The kind old French lady had so much of her

nation's tact and delicacy that she made no attempt to force the confidence of "her child" as she still called her. She had been terribly shocked at the change in the girl. Shattered health and broken nerves were a sad experience for a bride of six months. But Renée would say nothing, and her father knew nothing, so the old lady drew her own conclusions, and contented herself with such ministry of love and care as was best suited to the situation.

There had been open rebellion on Renée's part when both the doctor and her father opposed her desire for solitude as well as change of scene. But when Madame Gascoigne met her with neither question, nor observation, her resolution gave way.

"Just leave me alone," was all she said, as she freed herself from the tender embrace of a first greeting. And she had been taken at her word.

If she read, or walked, or merely sat gazing for long hours at the shining sea before the cottage window, no questions were asked, no interference offered. After two weeks of such absolute rest her mind began to calm down again. She was still so young, and life might yet atone for this marred and tragic opening. She read Geoffrey's letters again and again, wishing they revealed more of Geoffrey himself. She looked at first anxiously, then wistfully, for one other letter that had never come, though promised. The omission was her own fault, that she knew. Her temper again. That quick

petulance which had so often stood between her best interests and her impetuous desires.

The warm sun, the delicious air, the simple food and life began to exercise their due effects. She woke with a sense of strength instead of a tired indifference. She found in exercise a solace for troubled thoughts, and in books an interest that could force attention, instead of seeking to gain it. Once she turned the corner her improvement was rapid. Madame Gascoigne saw, and rejoiced, and waited. Some day the child would speak; some day the burden be shared with this truest and oldest friend. Meanwhile, she contented herself with the improvement of which she had almost despaired. Those letters must surely be from her husband, and to write so often meant that he was not indifferent, or faithless, or any of the tragic, dreadful things that she had feared at first. Such being the case the change could only be attributed to grief for that other cousin, the one of whose tragic end she had been told by old Jessop in their confidential talk.

Naturally such an event had been a shock to the girl; she of the tender heart, and warm quick impulses, and generous nature. "But it will all come right," thought the old lady, nodding over her delicate needlework in the sunny cottage parlour. "Time heals everything, and when one is young one can forget so easily."

So when Renée went out with the old fisherman, who was their landlord, and learnt to row, and fish,

and set a sail, and would come in with the salt of the sea in her hair, and the flush of the sun on her cheeks, and the innocent joy of some fresh nautical experience to relate, her wise old friend rejoiced with her and encouraged her, thankful that the cloud had lifted at last.

She wrote of all this to Renée's father. She never doubted but that such welcome news was given to George Gale by Renée herself.

Then one day came a letter in an unknown handwriting, bearing the London postmark. Madame Gascoigne expressed surprise, and the fact drew Renée's attention.

"Hadn't you better open it?" she said, and a hot flush rose to her face. She stooped to pat the head of the old Bobtail who belonged to the fisherman, but had devoted himself to the young lodger. She chattered disjointed phrases to the animal by way of showing indifference. But the rustle of the paper, the quick occasional comments of the reader were so many pricks to her nerves. She had recognized the writing at once. She was wondering how Aubrey Derringham had secured their address.

"To think of it!" exclaimed the old lady, laying down the letter at last. "Figure to yourself, my child, that Mr. Derringham, who calls himself my 'old friend,' writes here to propose himself a visit! He will not come unless your health is equal to receiving him. Your health!" She smiled. "I would that he could see you now, all rosy, and

joyous once again. But he is to be commended for his thoughtfulness, is he not?"

"How did he know where you were?" asked the girl.

"Oh, that—it was a simple affair. He addressed himself to your father." She turned to the letter again. "He says here that an affair of some importance requires your attention. But on no account would he trouble you unless your health was restored sufficiently for such an interview."

"I'm quite well—now," said Renée.

"Then do you wish that I tell him to come? He will motor down, he says, and awaits a wire of permission."

"Motor!" Renée's eyes flashed. She thought of the lovely Mercédès; the delight of long sunny days spent in riot of speed and glory of scenery. Did he intend to stay? Had he thought of her passion for motoring, and was he coming down for that reason? But why had he not written to her? Was he still offended?

She rose from the breakfast table, and pushed back her chair. "I'll go into Penzance and send the wire," she said. "It's a lovely day, I'll enjoy the walk."

"It is too far, *chérie*," remonstrated the old lady.

"Nonsense! I'm as strong as ever I was. If I feel tired I can drive back. What am I to say?"

"That remains for you, my child. Simply tell him he may come when he pleases."

And Renée went off for her hat, and called the

dog for company. Spring was in her heart, and in her feet, and in every copse and lane she traversed. Birds were singing on bare boughs that soon would be aflush with new leafage.

"Oh! it must be good news that he brings!" she told herself. "And he hasn't forgotten! I tortured myself for nothing, imbecile that I am!"

She thought of a dozen ways of wording that "wire of permission." But after all it was only a very simple message that went.

"Come when you please. Renée."

CHAPTER XXVI

“THROUGH BARS THAT HIDE THE STARS”

THE first glance at Aubrey Derringham's face showed it grave and anxious enough to alarm the girl whose hand he held. Ordinary greeting was an effort. The fact of having to sit at the tea table and talk conventions to the old French lady was a greater effort. And every moment the girl's heart grew heavier, as she asked herself what had happened now? What could have happened to disturb Aubrey so seriously?

The moment tea was finished she sprang up. “We will go down to the sea,” she said. “It is a lovely evening and warm. I'll take you for a row, if you like?”

Aubrey rose with alacrity, offered excuses to the old French lady, who only smiled and nodded, and said: “Enjoy yourselves, my children,” and then they were side by side once more, petulance and differences forgotten, the graver side of life demanding all their attention.

As briefly as possible Aubrey Derringham related what had happened. There was no doubt that someone was suspicious of Geoffrey. No

doubt that he was shadowed and watched. No doubt that Ann Whyddon had been interviewed, and the villagers questioned.

The one thing that did not fit the changed identity was that new habit of temperance. That fact and Renée's departure had been the significant discoveries of their joint enemy. After that meeting on the moor, and Chaffey's return to London, Geoffrey had become the prey of his own terrors, and the recipient of vague threats, which had at last culminated in a direct menace. Receiving it the boy seemed to have lost all self-command. He rushed off to Moreton, took train, and came straight to Aubrey's rooms in the Albany. Once there he collapsed, and was now in a state of fever and nervous prostration that was really alarming. All he had gone through of hardship and anxiety, of lonely terrors, and strained nerves had resulted in a complete breakdown.

"The cause," said Aubrey, "is here."

He took out a letter from his pocket book, and gave it to the girl. She stood steadily enough, though sky and sea seemed whirling round her, as she read.

It was an insolent letter, full of veiled threats, but its end was significant enough: "You best know if you can afford to be blown on, or if a matter of £1000 is worth the price of your safety. You've rich friends, and plucky ones. Ask their advice."

"Those last words are a veiled threat," said

Aubrey, as he took the letter from her shaking hand. "It's a hit at me. The man knows well enough that Geoffrey can't give him a thousand pounds. That he daren't ask your father, or that *you* daren't ask him either. He's got us all in a trap, and he knows that we know it. Yet not a name is mentioned, nor is his name signed."

Renée looked at him, unable to frame the question trembling on her lips.

"Do you doubt that I'd give it, twice, ten times over, if I thought it would save Geoffrey?" said Aubrey passionately. "But that's the question we've to face. It's blackmail of the most blackguardly sort. And no blackmailer rests satisfied with one attempt. This means fresh demands; never-ending fears; life turned to hellish torment for us all. No wonder the poor boy has broken down under the strain. But, for all that, he's done the worst thing he could have done. He's—run away from a threat, instead of facing it."

Renée turned her white face to the sea, and wondered whether implied cowardice might not include herself. Was she not prime mover in all this mischief? From first to last had she not dragged Aubrey Derringham's name into the sordid horrors of her family life?

"I was reluctant to tell you," said Aubrey presently. "But Geoffrey seemed to think it best. We daren't say anything to your father. You and I have got to decide it between us. It's horrible for you, Renée, either way. You'd have to

swear Geoffrey was your husband against even your father's doubts; the hateful records of that prison. You'd have to face it, and make him face it before those authorities whose duty it is to search to the bottom of the mystery—or else——”

“Is there any other way?” she cried.

“I said ‘either’ way. There is an alternative. I could see the man, and try to bind him down to—this one exaction. I might succeed—I don’t know. I should play a very bold game, for I would bring a lawyer with me, and the matter would be made legally binding. I think we might secure him in that way.”

“A lawyer?” she faltered. “But surely no lawyer would consent to hide such a secret? You would have to tell him the whole facts of the case?”

“The—man—I have in my mind,” said Aubrey, “knows the facts of the case. Knows that there was a miscarriage of justice; that Geoffrey suffered for sake of another. I could prove now who that other was!”

“George——” she gasped. “You’ve found out?”

“We have as much proof as can be got from circumstantial evidence apart from strong suspicion. I have come here, Renée, to put both cases before you, and ask for your decision. Don’t speak at once, or even tonight. Think it over, and tell me the result. I must go back to town tomorrow.”

“So soon?” The words escaped her with scarce conscious regret. She had hoped he was going to stay for a few days at least.

"Yes. We have to settle this matter as quickly as possible. If Geoffrey's mind were set at rest, his health would soon recover. As it is, all this has preyed upon him to such a degree that the doctor is very anxious. You know the boy was hardly strong enough to leave us when he had to play up to Chaffey's desperate ruse. Think of all he has gone through since? Loneliness and constant fear, and now this dastard's threat."

"I ought not to have left him," she faltered. "I see it now. It must have roused suspicion. But I'm always doing the wrong things, and regretting them!"

She looked up at him, the tears wet on her pale face. How pale and childish it looked in that twilight obscurity.

"You—ought to hate me!" she went on. "I've dragged you into all this, and not even shown you common gratitude. Oh—why don't you treat us as we deserve! Go away, and leave us to get out of the scrape that we got ourselves into!"

He took her hands in both his own. "Dear little girl," he said gently, "you know you are talking foolishly. Is it at all likely that having put my hand to this particular plough I should decline to drive the furrow? Have I not told you that I owe you the reclaiming of a very useless life? Is that nothing to be grateful for? Chaffey could tell you a different story. Now, pull yourself together for one last effort! It shall be the last, I promise you."

She drew away her hands, and wiped her eyes.

"Very well," she said. "I will go back to town with you, and *marry* Geoffrey!"

Aubrey felt his heart stand suddenly still. The declaration was so absolutely unexpected.

"I will *not* have you pay this money!" she went on passionately. "I will *not* have your name dragged into this sordid business! Let me marry Geoffrey at once; at his bedside even. Then I can swear he *is* my husband. The authorities must believe *me*."

Still Aubrey Derringham said nothing. With all he knew of her impulsiveness, her swift and sudden twists of temper, he could not have credited her with such a daring scheme as this. It was as if she had leaped over the very barrier that he had been trying to evade. And having achieved the leap, she calmly confronted him as victor.

Marry him! Marry Geoffrey Gale, her husband's brother! Would it be even legal, he wondered, thinking confusedly of tables of affinities, of the deceased wife's sister's bill; of the facts connecting George Gale's death with the quick termination of widowhood?

So white, and stern, and silent he was, that the girl grew alarmed. She touched his arm. "Oh! do speak!" she implored. "What is the matter with you? Have I done something wrong again?"

"No—not yet," he said harshly. "But I think it would be wrong to do what you said. I mean unless it was excused by one fact."

"What?"

"That it was Geoffrey you had loved, never his brother."

The colour ebbed from the upraised face, leaving it white as death.

"Geoffrey? *loved* Geoffrey?" she repeated. "Of course I loved him always—as a brother—but I hated George!"

"Only as a brother?" said Aubrey. "Renée, are you sure? Oh—are you sure?"

"I am as sure as that I am here—saying it," she answered.

The pendulum of feeling swung back again. The reaction of that moment, its sudden relief, set Aubrey trembling with long repressed emotion. He had struggled, suffered, endured, and after all she had never loved either of the two men who had controlled her life, and still affected its future.

"Then—then—you shall not do this thing! You shall not be sacrificed a second time! No, not if it costs me everything I most value—that I swear!"

She drew back a step or two, frightened by his impetuosity. She had never seen him so moved, so stirred.

"But—why not?" she said faintly.

"Why not? Because I—love you, Renée! Because ever since that hour that night at Weymouth, your sorrowful girl's face has haunted me, and lived with me, and become to me the dearest thing in life! What it cost me to let you go out of

it, to meet you as I met you on the moor, you'll never know, for I could never tell you. And I always thought you loved Geoffrey Gale, and from some foolish idea of self-sacrifice had married his brother. And I've been wrong. Oh, my dear, don't look so frightened! I—I won't ask anything of you. We will be just as we have been until this black cloud has passed, for pass it must. I told you there were two alternatives. Well, now there's only one, and that one I shall take. The bold course is often the best. To face a coward often frightens him into a deeper cowardice. Leave it all to me, Renée. Only promise to do as I ask, and to—trust me?"

He held out his arms, and caught the sobbing shaken wreck of girlhood to his heart, and held her there while the storm had its way. Of all the love that had grown up for her, and shrined her wayward, adorable, impulsive self so jealously, he said nothing. He knew it was not the moment. She was now only realizing what a man's love might mean. Possibly she was ignorant of her own heart; terrified to acknowledge what she had never allowed herself to believe.

The quiet touch of his hand on the bright uncovered head, the quiet tones of his voice in her ear, gradually calmed those wild sobs.

"I—oh, I have been so unhappy. . . . Oh—I never thought . . . I never thought . . ."

"Don't think now," he said, "of anything, except that you are to get well and strong again,

and that I am going to manage everything for you—as your friend. I am *that* you know, my child. You allowed me to call myself so.”

“Was there ever such a friend!” she cried brokenly. “And I’ve behaved so horridly—always—to you.”

“I forgive it all,” he said gently. “I don’t think I ever bore you any resentment for it. You don’t suppose I shall do so—after this?”

She raised her head and shook back the loose soft hair, and met the passionate tenderness of those remembered eyes. No other eyes had ever looked at her as his had looked, yet she had never read their true meaning until now. Helpless, sorrowful, nerve shattered as she felt herself to be, that gravely tender look brought assurance and comfort and a joy she had never known till now.

“I don’t know what to say,” she faltered. “Except that I trust you. I always have, you know. You make me feel so safe.”

He smiled then, and bending touched her lips with the restraint he had learnt in a hard school.

“If you feel—that,” he said, “I am content. . . . The rest can wait.”

He drew her hand within his arm, and they walked on in silence. Both were too agitated, too deeply moved for commonplace speech. There were issues ahead to be dealt with, but the present moment had also its importance.

Aubrey Derringham had long known that he

had committed himself to a grave responsibility from the hour when he had promised to help Renée in her scheme for Geoffrey's escape.

It is no use to set private judgment against the strong forces of that huge machine which can grind men's lives to dust, and break their spirit and wear out their energies by its complicated ingenuity. No matter of absolute right and absolute wrong has ever been judged on these merits of wrong and right by any Law Court in the world. They never will be so judged. It would be too simple a method of dealing with the obvious, and it would effectually barricade any side issue on which right and wrong are fought. Law is for those who have made it what it is, not for those who desire its help in any matter of self-justification. Like the Church it is set upon a pedestal of importance, and surrounded by such an enormous paraphernalia of pomp, pageantry, and superstition that the lay mind, or the distracted public, can only lament their inability to affect it.

When it has driven a desperate soul to suicide, or crime, it takes refuge in the ordered platitude of "unsound mind." Aubrey Derringham knew that that verdict was very near a fresh challenge when he had rescued Geoffrey Gale from his desperate plight. He had saved him, helped him, consoled him. He could not allow that in acting thus he had done wrong. On that point his conscience was clear. On the other hand he trembled to think what might happen to Renée, Chaffey,

himself, if their part in this adventure ever came to light.

In his longing to defend the girl who trusted him so entirely he felt he must nerve himself for a trying ordeal. He must brave the very law he had broken; face the whole structure of difficulties, contingencies, fiction, fact, and procedure contained in these two words "legal advice."

When at last he spoke to Renée, her tears were spent; her voice had lost its tremor.

"You understand, my dear, that your first suggestion is impracticable. You have been sacrificed once. I cannot permit a second 'burnt offering.' Now, my plan may succeed, or it may not. But even if it fails, we are no worse off. If this brute has to be muzzled, well, muzzled he must be. As soon as Geoffrey is well enough, I shall get him out of the country. All I want to ask you is to go back to Shapsdown as soon as possible, and arrange to dispose of, or despatch, your own possessions. Would you have the courage for this? I don't like to ask you, but it must be you, or your father. I have heard of an old broken down cleric who would be only too glad to take George's place. He has written to the Rector and offered himself. He is very poor and has an old sister to maintain. I thought if you could leave two or three rooms furnished it would be a charity. You will not need anything, save your own personal belongings. The fact of your being seen

again, and making such arrangements, will prevent suspicion at Geoffrey's sudden departure. You must tell your servant that his health broke down; that the place did not agree with him, or with you. There's also the question of the car. I could send Chaffey if you wish. He could bring it away——"

"Oh—couldn't I come away in it?" she cried. "The few things I want out of the house could be packed and sent off by rail. But if I could have my dear little car again, and come back *here*—" She looked up.

"You wish to come back here, not Weymouth?"

"Weymouth? . . ."

"Will it make you so unhappy?" he asked.

"Not *now*!" she said, her face a vivid flame, her eyes dark with emotion. "Everything is changed since you came. I feel strong enough to bear whatever there is to bear."

"I hope there will not be very much more, my child, for both our sakes."

CHAPTER XXVII

"IN GOD'S SWEET WORLD AGAIN"

"You have put a very remarkable case, Mr. Derringham. As strange a one as I ever heard. Now, is it my professional advice you are seeking, or do you wish me to speak as a friend?"

Aubrey Derringham was in Joshua Myers's chambers, in the Temple. He had come there by appointment, and the meeting had been one of real pleasure at the renewal of intimacy. Aubrey, speaking for a friend, as he put it, had laid before the shrewd young barrister a *résumé* of facts of his own experience. The fiction of that "second person" did not deceive Myers for a moment. He smiled to himself as he thought that in a certain drawer close to his hand lay a red-taped bundle of documentary evidence which would have given name and date and place and person of every actor in the drama so lucidly described.

"I should like your professional opinion of course," said Aubrey. "But I should value a friendly chat on the subject even more. Will you come round to my rooms tonight? At least . . . I forgot——"

"Is *he* staying there?" questioned Myers, an amused smile touching the corners of his mouth as he glanced at the confused face.

"He—who?"

"The friend, of course, about whom you have been consulting me."

Aubrey hesitated a moment.

"It's best to tell the truth to two people in the world, if no more," said Myers. "Your doctor and your lawyer. You can trust me fully, my dear Derringham. I am the recipient of secrets enough to divorce half the leaders of society, and send a score or two of commercial magnates to the treadmill. Do you suppose—we—who follow the Law are not sometimes the Law's sternest accusers?"

"You ought to be, God knows!" said Aubrey impulsively. "For you make more criminals than you condemn."

"That's rather sweeping," said Myers. "But, possibly you're a little hurt at the present moment. Well, I'll just look over those papers, if you'll leave them, and let you know my opinion tonight. What time shall I be at your rooms?"

"At eight o'clock. I can offer you some sort of a dinner, unless you prefer to go out?"

"No, I should prefer to stop in, and have a full talk. Your story is interesting enough for a modern novel. Only in a novel no one would believe it could have happened. Coincidence is rarely the slave of opportunity. Your—friend—should be congratulated."

Still with that enigmatical smile he opened the door and showed Aubrey out. But it left his lips with the closing of the door.

"My quixotic friend has got himself into trouble," he said. "This is the Jessop v. Gale case, or I'm much mistaken. I remember how interested he was in it, at the time."

Aubrey walked back to his rooms in the cold spring sunshine. That letter had given a week for decision. There were yet three days before he need decide.

Geoffrey Gale had thrown off his feverish attack, but it had left him very shaken, and very weak. It needed all Aubrey's hopefulness and all his patience to cope with the growing melancholia that held him in thrall. Fear and intimidation had broken down his small reserve of strength. Even here, with only Chaffey's kindly nursing, and Derringham's safeguarding presence, he was a prey to every sort of terror and anxiety.

His one desire was to get away, to get out of this harsh unlovely country and seek fresh scenes, and strive for fresh energies. But the doctor declared he was unfit for travel yet. He must rest, and feed up, and get his strength back. Even then he must not go unaccompanied. To Aubrey he spoke even more seriously than to his patient. The boy—for Geoffrey's twenty-four years meant only that—had received a severe shock. Something that had shattered the delicate fibres of a delicate

organization, in a fashion that defied mere drugs to restore.

"If the source of the trouble could be traced, if his mind could be set at rest, the physical forces might rally again. You are his friend, perhaps he will confide in you. . . . I have done all I can."

Aubrey listened in silence. There was nothing to confide. He knew Geoffrey's secret, and Geoffrey's danger, but the knowledge brought no hint of how to cope with its disastrous effects. He tried his best to cheer the boy. He told him that all the skill of Myers's astute brain would go to the unravelling of this tangled skein, and he tried also to impress upon him that if the worst came, hush money would be paid, and the matter closed for ever.

He and Myers dined alone, with Chaffey in attendance. Chaffey, as the *deus ex machina* of all this tragedy, alone kept cool and impassive. The fact of the barrister's presence in his master's rooms spoke of final desperation. It was the last stand against the enemy, and it must mean conquest, or defeat. He left the two over their coffee and liqueurs, put the silver box of cigarettes on the table, and then retired.

He would have given a great deal to know what went on behind those closed doors, but it spoke well of his reformed habits that he had learnt resistance of temptation as well as its meaning. So

he went quietly away to Geoffrey's room, and gave him the opiate without which sleep had become impossible.

He sat there by the fire reading until the strained eyes closed and sleep sent its ministering calm to the restless frame.

Then he lowered the light, and went away to his own duties. He had no suspicion that these bachelor quarters were doomed, that his master was regaling himself with a prospective vision of a country house and home fireside, and a companion that Chaffey's faithful devotion could never rival

It was twelve o'clock before that conference ended. Twelve o'clock when, wearied, but no longer harassed by doubts, Aubrey Derringham clasped Myers's extended hand and tried to thank him for a service beyond all thanks.

The barrister answered the pressure with the silence of strong emotion.

"The survival of the fittest is the best principle of nature," he remarked. "I'd like to have seen my young client again, but I must remember that he is *not* my client. The case is as clear as anything can be in this pettifogging world. I think our friend, the blackmailer, will be a little astonished when he is summoned by the Governor for a private conference, and confronts me."

"It's a bold game," exclaimed Aubrey. "But I agree with you that boldness is the only way to

meet such a charge. Of course I will hold myself in readiness to come, if called upon—and so will Renée.”

“You won’t be called upon, trust me. I know the Governor well. I shall take a firm stand; that of the loftiest integrity, considering what an important part I played in the case. George Gale’s flight to London was for legal advice. His breakdown can be certified as the result of grief for his brother, and the villainous threats of our friend at Dartmoor. Oh, trust me, my dear Derringham, there’s no strenuous anxiety on the part of those in authority to parade such a matter as this. If one man was wrongfully convicted, as we know he was, well, better hush it up. If the other has suffered indignity, he suffered it in the cold silence of death. Let it rest at that. But the wretch who has tried to trade on an accidental circumstance, to persecute an unfortunate family, who have already suffered so much, why for such a one we demand swift justice. If he is dismissed we do not threaten active proceedings. We are not unmerciful. But there must be an end, once and for ever, to these dastardly attempts. There—have I pleaded sufficiently to convince you?”

“Indeed you have. It’s like cutting the ground from under his feet. I almost wish I could see him. He gave me a bad half hour once, when he searched my house.”

“You keep yourself out of it,” said Myers, putting the papers in his pocket, “and trust to

me. I'm not pleading before a blundering old dunderhead *this* time, too obsessed by his own ills and ailments to bring clear judgment to any case!"

Chaffey stole in to minister to any last requirements. Possibly to hear results.

His master's face was reassuring. "I do believe we're out of the wood at last," he said. "Our friend has overreached himself for once. It's not likely that the Governor would credit his story in face of the array of evidence we can bring, with the prisoner's own counsel to back up our defence. With the holy terror of publishing legal error as our strongest weapon against the laws we've defied."

"It's splendid, sir!" exclaimed Chaffey. "Splendid! I—I think I brought you an interest in life at last, sir?"

"More than we reckoned for, Chaffey, but I'm not sorry. I can never pretend again that life is not—interesting."

With all his confidence, Aubrey Derringham waited with feverish apprehension for the result of that interview with the authorities. Myers had promised to wire the result very guardedly. Neither of them desired the post-office officials at Princetown to get wind of *who* demanded such urgent information. Myers had suggested sending the message through his own clerk, who was

to wire it on to Aubrey's chambers. He had to command his soul in patience; to cheer Geoffrey; to write to Renée.

He had schooled himself to do that with the same restrained tenderness that he had shown her on that night of self-betrayal. In her distress, and confusion, and with the consciousness of that tragic widowhood it would have seemed to him the worst possible taste to play the ardent lover. She knew what he felt. She knew he had saved her from another sacrifice. Her own heart would tell her the rest.

She was still in Cornwall. He had advised her remaining there until this affair was settled. Besides, he could not spare the invaluable Chaffey just yet.

He and Geoffrey Gale were in his sitting-room awaiting that expected telegram. Aubrey sat in his favourite chair, a heap of newspapers beside him, a cigarette between his lips.

Geoffrey's face was deadly white; the muscles of his face twitched nervously. He started at every sound, though there were not many to reach that quiet retreat.

"If—we don't hear tonight," he muttered. "Derringham, isn't it time? Surely it's time? The interview was to be this morning."

"It might not have been till this afternoon," said Aubrey. "Mr. Myers would have to wait the Governor's own time."

"Of course. . . . Oh, do tell me again, do

you think it was a wise move? Do you think they'll believe?"

"My dear boy, I can only repeat what I've said before. Myers would not have done such a desperate thing had he not felt *sure* he would bring it off. So, for God's sake, try and calm yourself. Will you have a cigarette, a whiskey and soda, anything?"

"I'll have a drink. Yes, you must pardon me, Derringham. It was living in that beastly house—the loneliness—it got on my nerves, and then that threat finished me."

Aubrey gave him the drink for which he had asked, and took a small quantity himself. He had a difficult task, that of seeming cool and indifferent, while in reality he suffered as keenly as the boy. He began to talk to him of plans he had formed. Of how they would take the mail boat for San Francisco, as soon as his health permitted. Of the benefit he would obtain from a sea voyage, the lovely climate, the freedom from future anxiety.

"We—do you mean to say you are coming with me?" exclaimed Geoffrey.

"I said so. It's a long time since I've had a sea voyage. I mean to see you safely established, and then——"

"What then?"

"There is Renée to think of, and your uncle."

The boy clasped his hands together, and leant forward in his chair.

"Derringham, you're doing all this—for her sake! I know——"

Aubrey's face lost some of its composure.

"What then?" he said.

"What then? It's such a big thing; it means so much! It makes me ashamed."

The ready tears sprang to his eyes. They were never very far away.

"You've no need to be ashamed," said Aubrey. "And it will rest with you to repay her—for the big thing—as you call it. No one else can."

"How—in what way?"

"I will tell you later."

"No, no! *Now*, tell me now?" entreated the boy. "I'm not such a weak fool as you think. Why, even to know that I could do something for her, or you, puts strength into me. It means an object in life; it gives me something to live for. Do you know, last night, if it hadn't been for Chaffey I should have finished that morphia. Taken a double dose and ended everything. There, it's out. You can despise me a little more."

"God forbid that I should do that," said Aubrey compassionately. "I know what you've gone through. It would have tried stronger nerves than yours."

"But tell me—tell me what it is I can do—live for?"

"You force my hand," said Aubrey. "I had not meant to say anything yet. Simply as I can

put it, Geoffrey, the facts are these. I—love Renée. She—cares for me.”

“I—I guessed that.”

“Well, you know the situation. As long as you are in this country she must keep up the pretence of being a wife.”

“But I’m going away almost immediately.”

“But—can you *stay* away? Remember, that to all who know this story, Geoffrey Gale is dead. All your life you have to play that other part.”

“It means—banishment? That was what you meant when you said I could do one thing for you both?”

“Yes, it means banishment. Even your uncle must not know—yet. When he does, he will have to believe in your innocence, but he will be powerless to atone for his injustice. I have thought—sometimes, he might choose to make atonement. He might go to you, as Renée and I will go. Don’t fear you will be forgotten, my boy. Ah——”

He started violently. There was a loud ring at the outer door. He heard Chaffey go to answer it. Geoffrey sank back in his chair, his eyes resting on the door, whose opening meant life or death, or so it seemed to him.

Chaffey ushered in a lanky youth; sandy-haired, self-important. He held a yellow envelope in his hand. “Mr. Myers sent this to me. I thought it would save time if I brought it myself, sir.”

Aubrey held out his hand, marvelling at its steadiness.

The envelope was open. He took out the slip of paper, and read:

"Perfectly satisfactory. Wire all settled to the client for whom I am acting."

He looked at Geoffrey. "It's all right. The message is from Myers."

He turned to the youth, anxious to screen the half fainting figure in the chair. "Thank you so much for your trouble in coming here. Can my man give you some refreshment?"

The youth coloured and mumbled thanks, and Aubrey piloted him to the door, and called Chaffey. Then he closed it, and went back to Geoffrey.

"It's all right, it's all right! We're safe now! . . . Yes, cry if you please, don't mind me. It'll do you good . . . it'll do us both good . . . it'll do Chaffey good!"

For somehow Chaffey was there too; white and shaken, and holding their hands, and murmuring confused congratulations, but in his heart was a thankfulness that he could never have expressed, or they could never have understood. For—was not he the cause and originator of the whole business? He—who had determined to rouse his bored and listless master to the realities that underlie all phases of life?

A year later a beautiful steam yacht glided majestically into the harbour of San Diego, a thriving port of Southern California. As it came to anchor, flying the Union Jack at its masthead,

a boat shot out from the quay. It held a solitary passenger, whose coming seemed expected by two eagerly watchful figures leaning over the vessel's side.

"At last! Oh! he's waving his hand! Look, Aubrey! How well he looks, how changed!"

Changed indeed was the alert brisk figure that ran up the lowered ladder and reached the deck, and gave the hearty English greeting to remembered friends. The face was bronzed and healthy, the figure looked taller. But the eyes were Geoffrey's eyes, and the voice was Geoffrey's voice.

"To think you've come at last! I hardly dared hope it!"

"And we've brought father!" exclaimed Renée. "He's determined to see if Los Angeles is the paradise you've declared, and if it is—oh, here he comes! He must speak for himself."

But there was very little to say, as the young man and the old gripped hands, stood face to face, forgiving and forgiven.

"Geoffrey, my boy——"

"Uncle——"

"I've come to stay with you, if you'll have me. I'm a little tired of Manchester."

"We'll all stay with you, if you'll have us," cried Renée's eager voice. "Serves you right for describing an 'earthly paradise.' Not but what this is a very good beginning!"

She looked at the lovely scene, her eyes brimming, her face one flush of joyous welcome.

"A good beginning!" Geoffrey's voice thrilled. "I should say it was! Yes, you shall all come to my ranch. There's room enough—for all!" He glanced round. "Why—where is *he*?"

"Who?" asked Renée.

"Chaffey, of course."

"Here, sir. Hope you're well, sir? Pleased to meet you again, sir."

Geoffrey stared, then laughed, and seized the extended hand.

"Another disguise?"

"My steward," said Aubrey Derringham gravely. "A very capable man, my dear Geoffrey, though this is his first appearance in that character."

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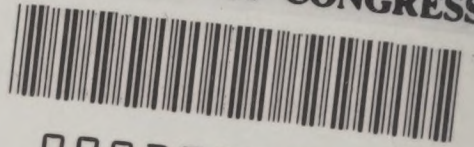
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